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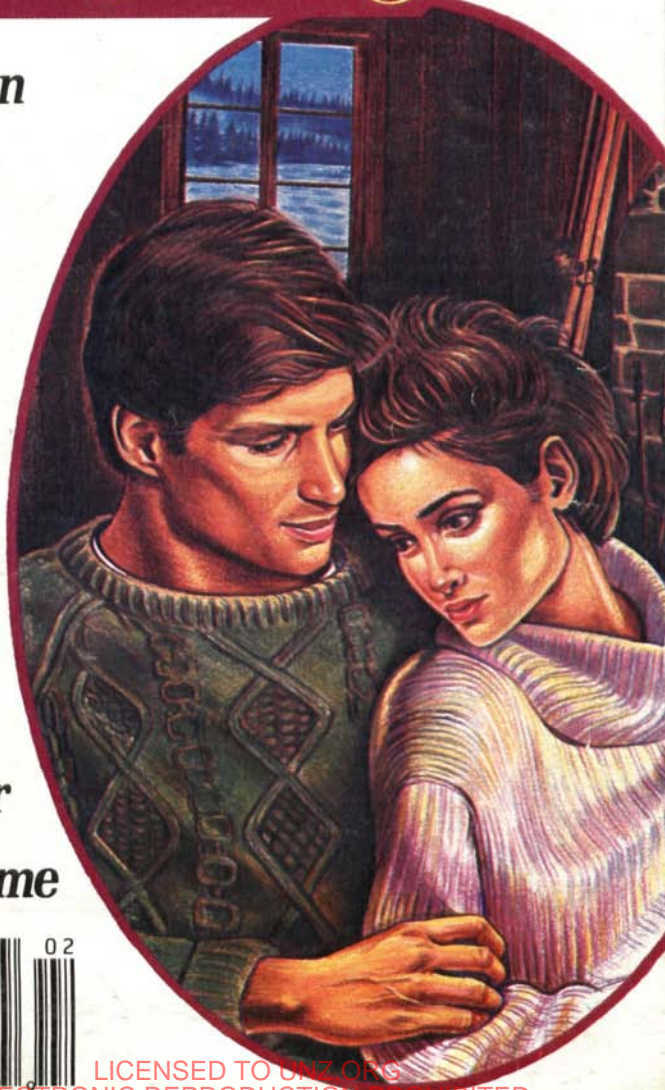
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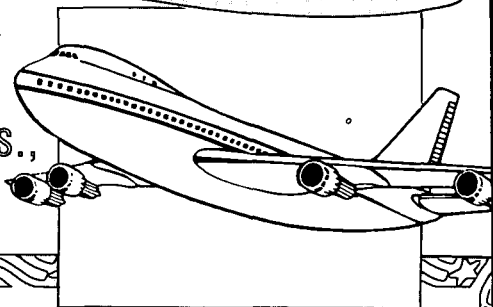
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# 5 Great Romances

NOV/DEC 1986 • VOLUME 4 NO. 6

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# Windflame

*To college fundraiser Melissa Markham, wealthy alumnus Dakin Quarry is big game. But when she targets him for a generous bequest, he antagonizes her colleagues, disrupts the banquet she's arranged, and engineers a tryst in his hotel room. The only endowments he's interested in are hers!*

SARAH CREWE

Melissa Markham slammed the car door shut and hurried up the stairs from the underground parking lot to the back entrance of the Art Institute of Chicago. A warm September breeze off Lake Michigan touched her face as she emerged briefly into the open air.

"I have an appointment at the Terrace Cafe," she called to a guard at the double glass doors.

The restaurant was just opening. In the

sculpture gallery that served as its entrance hall, a man in jeans and a tweed jacket stood alone, one hand jammed in his back pocket. He was checking the watch on his other wrist. Melissa came to an abrupt halt in front of him and smiled sweetly.

"I'm so sorry I'm late," she said, a little breathless from hurrying. She held a hand out to him. "The traffic on the Drive was unbelievable."

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The man looked up from his watch and hesitated, and Melissa let her glance sweep quickly over him. He was not at all what she had expected from his voice on the phone. She had pictured him smallish and a little plump. This man was tall, very tall indeed, with long legs and broad shoulders that seemed to strain the limits of his jacket. He looked like an athlete—a runner. He even, she noticed absently, was wearing white running shoes.

Finally he took her hand and shook it. Melissa felt an abrupt shiver run through her body, as if the touch of his palm against her own had set off some sort of chemical reaction.

"It really shouldn't take long," she nattered on, confused by the sensations his touch had set off in her. "We'd like to use the museum for Ransom's alumni dinner, but I do have to look at the facility, and of course we need to talk price."

"Ransom College?"

It was the first time the man had spoken. His voice was deep, deeper than she remembered it on the phone.

"Of course, Ransom College," she said sharply, clicking open the latch on her briefcase with one hand. "I'm Melissa Markham, Ransom's director of development. We spoke on the phone. We had an eleven-thirty appointment? To talk about using the Cafe for a kickoff dinner for Ransom's fund-raising campaign?"

The man was looking at her, and there was something amused about the tilt of his lips—lips surprisingly full and sensual in a face made up of sharp planes and angles.

"Did we?" he asked.

The truth dawned on her. Melissa pushed the papers she had started to extract from her briefcase back inside.

"I've made a mistake," she said flatly. "You're not Tom Burke."

"No." He shook his head, and soft wings of dark hair fell forward on either

side of his face.

"No," he repeated, "I'm not. I'm meeting someone here for lunch."

His smile broadened, and he let his gaze meander over Melissa: her thick, shoulder-length auburn curls; her wide-set hazel eyes above a slightly freckled nose and curved mouth; the lines of her breasts, disguised today by her amply cut jacket; and the length of her legs beneath the slim skirt.

"But I've certainly enjoyed talking with you, Melissa Markham, director of development," he added. "We must do this again sometime."

Melissa forcibly squelched her confusion. "You might have said something a little sooner," she muttered.

"You hardly gave me the chance," he answered with an amused shrug. "But it does appear that the real Mr. Burke is getting a bit restless." He motioned toward the glass doors of the restaurant.

Inside the room, a small, plump man was pacing quickly from table to table, shaking his head and glancing at his watch every step or two.

Forty-five minutes later, arrangements for the dinner in November more or less complete, Melissa left Tom Burke's office and made her way back out through the Terrace Cafe. She glanced nonchalantly from table to table as she went, but the tall dark man with the electric touch was not to be found.

Chicago's breezes were no longer warm when the night of Ransom's fund-raising dinner actually arrived some eight weeks later.

Inside the huge marble central hall, a sign directed Ransom guests down to the Terrace Cafe.

Melissa said a quick hello to Katherine McAllister, the silver-haired woman checking people in, then made her way through the room.

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The Cafe was as perfect as Tom Burke had promised: Round tables were set with crisp white linen and bowls of red and white flowers; shiny ceramic apples and strings of tiny white lights hung from the potted trees. Melissa moved from group to group, talking about Ransom's needs, gearing her pitch to what she knew about the people around her.

With fifteen minutes left before dinner, she headed back to Katherine's desk and stood in front of it, peering at the upside-down invitation list.

She nodded, pleased. "It really looks good," she began, but Katherine gave her arm a sudden sharp poke.

"Who is *that*?" Katherine interrupted in a frankly curious whisper.

The elevator doors on the opposite side of the gallery had opened, and a tall man with dark hair and broad shoulders was emerging, as if exploding from a cage that was too small for him.

The same man she'd met there two months earlier. He hesitated for a moment at the elevator doors, and the hint of a smile on his mouth left no doubt in Melissa's mind that he was enjoying the sight of her leaning over the desk, her blue jersey dress molded to her hips. His dark glance caught Melissa's and held it firmly.

Melissa ducked her head in a confused nod that she hoped passed for a polite greeting.

"Can we help?" Katherine was looking up at the man with open admiration.

"I hope so," the man said pleasantly. "My name's Dakin Quarry. I should be on your list." He pulled a cream-colored invitation from his jacket pocket.

"Quarry," Katherine repeated. "Dakin. What an unusual name."

The name clicked in Melissa's head. No reservation, but there was a star next to his name on the list—he was one of those targeted by the staff for special attention.

"Mr. Quarry," she said with a forced

smile, "I'm afraid the last time we met..." She cleared her throat and started again. "I had no idea you had any connection with Ransom."

The small smile was still on his face. "I don't suppose I look like the typical Ransom product," he said with a deprecating wave at his jeans.

Melissa tossed her head a little stiffly. "Ransom's student body is extremely diverse. In any case, we're delighted you could make it. I don't think we had a reservation..."

"No. I just decided to come. Am I allowed in?"

"You just decided?" Melissa repeated.

Dakin Quarry nodded. "Just this afternoon," he said. "But I've been thinking about it for a while."

The full force of his generous smile surged at Melissa, and she had the distinct sense he was quite sure he had made the right decision in coming.

"I don't think I've heard your name before," Katherine said. "I'm sure I'd have remembered it. Are you from Chicago, Mr. Quarry?"

He shook his head. "I've only been in the area about three years. I own a plant a bit west of here. Near Elgin." He looked from Katherine to Melissa and back again. "And please call me Dake," he added.

"Well, we're certainly glad to welcome you, Dake," Katherine said with a smile, handing him a name tag, "but I'm afraid we'll have to ask you to pay for your supper."

"Of course," he said. "How much do I owe the cause?"

"Twenty dollars." Katherine opened a small metal box that sat on one side of the desk. "Unless you'd like to add a little something for the campaign," she went on. "Melissa's decided we need to raise nine million dollars in the next two years." Her gaze skimmed Quarry's long,

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lithe body, and she snapped her fingers. "You must have been an athlete," she went on. "You might want to earmark your contribution for the new stadium."

"Something wrong with the old one?" he asked.

"Actually it is the old one," Melissa corrected quickly. "We're just planning some renovations."

"When it's done," Katherine chirped on, "it's probably going to be renamed after Bob Rudge. You must remember Coach Rudge if you were a Ransom athlete."

Dake's face become sharp, hard-edged, the way soft, fresh snow on a ski run suddenly turns out to be, on closer view, glittering, unwelcome ice.

"Robert Rudge Stadium," he said slowly. "I see."

"It's really a very small percentage—" Melissa began.

"I think I'll pass on the stadium fund," he said. He pulled his wallet from his pocket, his fluid motions thawing as quickly as they had frozen, and laid two ten-dollar bills on the desk.

"We're all set then," Katherine said, tucking the cash into the metal box. "Why don't you two go on in? I'll finish up out here."

"Come on, Mel," he said. "You must have work to do in there."

Melissa blinked. No one had ever called her Mel before, and she kind of liked the sound of it. It made her sound grown-up, somehow—not like little-girl Lissie.

"Why, yes," she said. She let the smile that had more than once been called dazzling settle on her lips. "Yes, I do. Let's go."

As they entered The Terrace Cafe, Melissa said, "I really should make the rounds before they actually serve dinner. If you'll excuse me. Maybe we can talk later." She sent him a bright smile and turned away.

He caught her arm with his hand. "Why don't I just tag along?" he asked casually. "I'd enjoy watching you work."

Melissa blew a tiny breath out and pushed her heavy auburn hair away from her face. Then she nodded and led him to a small circle of men that included Katherine McAllister's husband, Alan. The men were bemoaning the cost of housing in the area.

"You know," Melissa inserted at the first opportunity, "this economic situation hits everyone. We're getting a much higher percentage of students at Ransom who need some form of aid, and—"

"And Ransom actually feels some obligation to provide it?" a deep voice interrupted from beside her. Melissa glanced at Dake.

"Of course," she said firmly. "Ransom has always felt an obligation to the needy student. Forty percent of Ransom students have some kind of loan or direct grant from the college, and many more have low-cost federal loans or some other—"

"What percentage of this money you're asking for tonight will actually go to students who need it?" Dake asked. There was a hard edge to his voice. "And what percentage will go toward Mr. Rudge's stadium?"

"The stadium will take only about five percent—" Melissa began, but a familiar voice broke in.

"Talking about my stadium?"

Melissa felt a twinge of impatience. Dake clearly wanted an honest answer, and she wasn't at all sure he'd get one from Bob Rudge. Theoretically, Rudge was a great plus for Ransom and for Melissa: A popular football and track coach, he was also the college's athletic director, with a long string of winning seasons to his credit. So why, she wondered, did he annoy her so much? In the six months she'd been doing the job,



there was no one she had come to like less.

She turned to him with a forced smile.

"Hello, Bob. Actually we were talking about *all* of Ransom's needs."

"Terrific!" Rudge said. He reached across the circle and shook hands with Alan McAllister, then strained to read the name tags on the other men and nodded to them in turn.

"Well," he wheezed as he reached Dake, "Dakin Quarry. Now *that's* a name I've been seeing a lot of lately, sir. Never forget a name. I see by the papers you've been doing pretty well for yourself."

"Do you know Mr. Quarry, Bob?" Melissa asked.

"Man invented Windflame track shoes, darlin'," Rudge announced. "You ran track for us, what about fifteen years ago, wasn't it, sir?"

Melissa was aware that Dake was nodding, and she felt irrationally grateful that he was finally making *some* response, even just a nod.

"Damn good, the boy was." Rudge looked around the circle, confirming his pronouncement by locking eyes with everyone there. "So what's been up since then, sir? What've you been doing, besides coining money?"

Dake Quarry stood still for one more moment. The rest of the men looked at him curiously, and he let his gaze roam once around the circle.

"I've been recovering," he finally said in a voice that was steady and deep, "from Ransom College."

Then he turned and strode deliberately toward the exit.

"Best presentation I've heard from you yet," President Warren announced, giving Melissa's hand a firm shake. The few remaining guests were gathering their coats from a tired-looking checkroom clerk in the marble lobby of the museum.

Katherine McAllister gathered up her purse, preparing to leave. Then she stopped, pulled a folded piece of paper from her purse and handed it to Melissa.

"That man—the one with the marvelous shoulders. Dakin Quarry. He gave me this for you."

Melissa opened the note. The message was simple: *Palmer House, Room 1222*. She blinked once, then crumpled it into her own purse.

"His hotel room," she said dryly. "Tacky."

Katherine had the grace to look just a little shocked. "Well..." she began uncertainly.

"Tacky," Melissa repeated firmly. "And I'm exhausted. Thanks again, Kath, for all your help." She hugged Katherine and left the building.

She felt something close to elation, a lightness she had never felt before, as though if she weren't careful about where she stepped, she might float right on up among the skyscrapers. She glanced north toward the lofty John Hancock Building and grinned.

Straight ahead, on the corner of Wabash and Monroe, sat the Palmer House Hotel, matronly and massive, its brightly lit facade welcoming in the dark night.

Her steps slowed as she reached the lot that held her car, but almost without instruction her feet kept on moving.

"Damn," she muttered. "This is not smart."

She hesitated for a moment and glanced back at the parking lot, now well behind her. The smart thing, she told herself, would be to turn back, go to her car, and drive away.

Instead, five minutes later, she found herself standing in front of room 1222. The Palmer House.

She raised a hand and knocked on the door. For a moment there was no so

Then the door swung quietly open, and Dake Quarry stood smiling at her from the other side.

"Melissa Markham, director of development," he said, drawing out the syllables with a faintly Western lilt. "How nice to see you again."

Melissa stepped quickly into the room before she could change her mind and flee.

"I was afraid you wouldn't come," he said softly as she moved by him.

"I just got your message." Her voice was as nervously brisk as her footsteps. "You did seem rather in a hurry to get away."

"Robert Rudge has always had that effect on me."

"Well," she said, making a conscious effort to smile, "I assume you want to talk about giving Ransom some money. Yes?"

He looked at her for a moment, eyebrows raised, and then threw his head back and laughed.

"No," he said finally, "I'm not quite there yet. Will you run away if I tell you I'm more interested in you than in your job?"

Melissa shrugged. "I won't run away. But," she added with a smile, "it might make a difference in the degree of my interest in you."

Dake tipped his head a little, and the hooded, mysterious look returned. "Ah. Well, I did want to apologize. For running out on your party. I hope it didn't make the evening too difficult for you."

"I really don't think many people noticed," she said.

"How disappointing. Not even Bob Rudge?"

"Oh... well, yes." She nodded and smiled. "Yes, Bob noticed."

"Said something, did he?"

Melissa looked at him. "Dake," she said, "if you have some old fight to

pick—"

"Sit down," he quietly interrupted.

She walked to the couch and sat, feeling a flurry of nervousness.

"Is my apology accepted?" he asked.

She looked up at him. He lowered his head a little to look at her, and his dark hair fell forward. He lifted both hands and pushed it back. Like a farmer, she thought suddenly—the way a farmer might push his hair back in the middle of a hot field. She laughed softly.

"Apology accepted," she said.

He looked at her for a moment longer, eyebrows slightly raised in curiosity, then turned away. "How about some wine?" he asked. "This room comes stocked with some remarkably bad California."

"That would be great. *Anything* would be great. I don't drink when I'm on duty."

Dake glanced over his shoulder at her as he poured two glasses of wine. "Well, Mel Markham, director of development, I'm glad you decided to come and relax with me. I've wanted to know more about you since you first came panting up to me and introduced yourself, *lo* these many long weeks ago. So tell me how you got started in this line of work."

Melissa smiled. "Sometimes I think I was born doing it. I used to go around my neighborhood when I was a kid, asking for donations for the starving kids in... wherever it was at the moment. Then when I graduated from Ransom, I married a doctor, so volunteering for charity work was part of the deal. Very socially acceptable." She made a face, and Dake smiled.

"But you kept at it," he said.

"Mmm. I found I still liked it. As long as I really cared about the cause. And I was good at it."

"What happened to your doctor, Mel?" he asked.

"My husband didn't like it when the

volunteer work turned into a career," she said steadily.

Dake shook his head. "But you're doing good—theoretically—for other people. Just the way a doctor does."

Melissa shrugged. "He didn't see it that way." She shifted her weight. "What about you?" she asked. "Where did you appear from? Even Katherine McAlister's never heard of you, and she knows every breathing, money-making soul in Chicago."

He looked at her and grinned. "I came from Colorado. A little town in the northeast corner called Brush. My parents raised sugar beets. Ransom gave me an athletic scholarship because I held the national junior title in the four-forty when I was in high school, and I took it instead of Colorado State because I wanted to see what a city looked like. After college I did a little of this and a little of that, played some basketball in Europe, and a couple of years ago I started selling a running shoe I'd designed. My factory's out near Elgin. Enough?"

"Not enough," he said when she remained silent. "Okay. Let's see. I was married once, briefly, a long time ago. No children. Windflame Runners are very popular all of a sudden. My factory grosses . . . Do you want the figures?"

Melissa shook her head. She knew she was grinning. "That's enough to start," she said. So he was single. And he was gorgeous. And she was feeling something deeper and richer, way down inside, than she had ever before felt about a man she had just met.

Time to go, she told herself abruptly.

She started to rise, and Dake rose, too.

"If you just wanted to apologize . . ." she began uncertainly.

"That's not all I wanted, Mel," he countered.

Melissa let herself fall back against the couch, all too conscious of how close their

bodies would be if they were both on their feet.

"Why did you come here, Mel?" he asked softly, his voice almost a whisper.

"I . . ." She held the arm of the couch tightly and straightened her shoulders. "Why did you come to the dinner?" she responded, challenging. "When you dislike Ransom so much?"

He looked down at her. "There's a hard answer and an easy one. The hard answer is, because I thought it was time to give Ransom another chance. The easy one is, because I wanted to see you again."

He reached over and set his wineglass down on a nearby table, then took hers from her hand and deposited it there, too. Then he rested both his hands on her shoulders, and suddenly they were joined together, a single fluid being.

The pressure of his body was hard against her own, his broad chest against her full, firm breasts. He slid one hand inside the V of her dress, brushing the back of it across the top of her breasts.

Melissa pulled in a deep breath. It felt like the air along the lake shore when she ran in the early morning—clean and cool and just a little tart.

Now the pressure against her was almost unbearable—against her mouth, her breasts, her thighs, all along the length of her body.

What the hell are you doing, Markham? she asked herself abruptly. In a hotel room, with some man you don't really know . . .

She took a quick step back and grasped his wrists, pulling his hands away from her. She shook her head fiercely.

Dake looked at her, his eyes wide and dark in the soft light. "Problems?" Dake whispered.

She dropped her hands to her sides and fought to keep her balance on un dependable legs. Finally she nodded.

"I find you very attractive," she said softly.

"Clearly, the feeling is mutual," he said. "Go on."

"This is *not* what I came here for," she said more firmly.

Dake tucked a finger under her chin and raised her face until she was looking directly at him. "Then why did you come, Mel? To talk me out of a million dollars?"

"If you're suggesting that that kiss was part of some plan, that's insulting!" she snapped. "Even if I *had* come here with some end in mind, it most certainly wouldn't have involved making a play for you. I didn't start this!"

Dake shrugged. "It wouldn't be the first time Ransom has dangled some bait in front of me that I couldn't refuse."

Melissa stared at him for a moment. Then she pulled the door open, stepped through it into the hallway, and slammed it shut behind her.

Melissa stripped off her yellow jogging suit, gingerly pulling it away from skin still damp and warm from her morning run. She toweled off, unfolded a plaid wool skirt and a navy turtleneck sweater from her woven backpack, and dressed quickly for work. Then she settled comfortably into the big chair behind her desk and plumped her backpack down beside her.

The door to her office creaked, and she looked up as a tousled head of red hair appeared around it.

"Boss? You free?"

Melissa leaned back in her chair and smiled. "Yep. So what's up?"

Jeff ran a hand through his curls, succeeding only in making them more unruly. "Call from the prez."

"At this hour? I just saw him last night."

Jeff shrugged and glanced at his watch. "He called precisely twenty minutes ago. Said he was sitting in his office reading the

*Wall Street Journal* and he saw a name he'd heard last night. Dakin Quarry. Man makes jogging shoes."

Melissa felt her shoulders stiffen slightly at the name, and she folded her hands primly in her lap. She looked at Jeff quizzically. "And?"

Jeff glanced at the piece of paper in his hand. "Seems someone mentioned to him last night that Mr. Quarry had come and gone rather . . . um . . . *abruptly*, I think, was the word he used. At the dinner, that is. And now he's reading in the *Journal* that the man's shoes are the hottest things since Frisbees. So he wants to know what the story is."

Jeff stopped and smiled. His eyes were no longer sleepy. "So Dakin Quarry turned up, huh?" he added.

"You expected him to, I take it?" she asked a little dryly.

Jeff shrugged. "I had a hunch. Nobody's gone after him for years, as far as I can see from the file. It was certainly worth sending out a second invitation."

Melissa scowled. "Yes, Dakin Quarry turned up at the dinner. He left early. I'm not sure why. But I'm going to find out," she continued more softly, "and when I do . . ."

Jeff held up both hands, palms forward. "The man had best watch out," he said, amused. "But don't tell me; tell the prez." He picked up the phone from her desk and punched several buttons, then handed Melissa the receiver. "Here you go." He smiled as Melissa exchanged pleasantries with the president of the college.

"Yes, sir, he was, and he did," Melissa responded to President Warren's question. "Yes, I'm aware that he's turned into quite a catch."

She listened for a moment as the president read from the newspaper article that was evidently in his hand.

"I certainly plan to find out why he left.

He seems to harbor a certain amount of hostility. . . .”

She paused again, listening to the voice booming over the line.

“Yes, sir. I’ll get on it as soon as I can. But I think we need to know a lot more about him before we make any kind of approach. I need some time to get to know him.” Suddenly Melissa could feel a warmth in her cheeks that reminded her of how close she had come to getting to know him very well indeed just a few hours earlier. “On paper, of course,” she added weakly.

Melissa took a deep breath. “Yes, sir,” she answered. “I’ll make him a number-one priority. I’ll do my best.” She hung the phone up gently, then slapped the desk hard with her open palm.

Jeff looked at her curiously. “My, my,” he said mildly.

Melissa glared. “I don’t like being told how to do my job!” she said.

“The prez tends to have pretty good instincts,” Jeff said.

Melissa sank back in her chair and let her body relax. “I know,” she said. “He’s good. And he believes in the same things I do, or I wouldn’t have taken this job.”

She pushed herself away from the desk and stood up.

“I suppose you know exactly what we have in our files?” she asked.

Jeff nodded. “Not much. Mostly the clippings I’ve found in the last couple of months.”

“How come nobody pointed him out to me as something special before now?”

Jeff shook his head. “He’s not really. I mean, he’s no richer than half the other alums from here. It’s just that he’s come into it rather quickly.”

She sat down again and looked up at Jeff. “See if you can find his undergraduate file. And check the campus newspaper files for the years he was

here. Let’s see what kind of student he was.”

It was shortly before lunchtime when Jeff reappeared clutching two manila folders.

“Speedy delivery,” he said with a sweeping bow.

“Well done. I’ll get to them after lunch. Melissa grinned and waved him back into his own office.

She heard the door to her office open again.

“Jeff—” she began, looking up.

But it wasn’t a redheaded twenty-one-year-old who now stood peering around the door to her office. It was a very tall, very dark, very gorgeous man in his mid-thirties. Melissa swallowed a gulp.

“May I come in?” he asked, taking a cautious step into the office. “There wasn’t anyone around out there, and—” He stopped mid-sentence. “Boy, you really are as beautiful as I remembered,” he added softly.

“It’s only been twelve hours,” she said drily.

He covered the distance between them in long, easy strides and shook her hand firmly. “Glad we’re still speaking,” he said.

Memories of the night before flooded through Melissa, and she slid her hand out of his and tucked it deep into the side pocket of her skirt.

“Of course.” Her voice sounded tight and a little sulky to her own ears. “Giving Ransom another chance, are you?” she asked, this time self-consciously bright.

“You know, I haven’t been back on this campus in fifteen years,” he mused. “Thought I’d never set foot on it again.” His gaze returned to Melissa, and his smile became a grin. “You must be pretty powerful stuff to get me through those gates. Come on, Mel. It’s a perfect day. Come have lunch with me, somewhere

far, far away. We'll go for a drive along the lake, and we'll talk about you and me. No Ransom College. They owe you some hours off, after last night. Besides, it's Friday."

"I..." Melissa tipped her head to one side, uncertain.

Like a small boy, he pulled at her hand. "Come on, Mel. Give up!"

Melissa shook her head helplessly as Dake led her across the room toward the door.

Dake was true to his word. They drove along the curving shore of Lake Michigan toward downtown in a silence that felt comfortable.

A short time later, Dake pulled into a parking place in Lincoln Park. They locked the car, put money into the meter, and headed into the zoo.

They stopped wherever something caught their eyes, and now and again they talked.

"Now *that* looks familiar," Melissa laughed. They were leaning on a metal railing by the children's section, in front of a family of pigs.

Dake stared at her. "Pigs?" he asked incredulously. "You're familiar with pigs?"

Melissa nodded a little fiercely. "You're not the only farm kid around," she said. "My family kept sheep and pigs both."

He looked at her, dark eyebrows raised. "Your father farmed? I thought you said you lived in Pittsburgh."

Melissa shook her head. "Near Pittsburgh," she said. "Northeast. We lived on a farm." She paused for a moment. "But my father wasn't a farmer. He was a lawyer, actually."

"Ah." Dake turned toward the pigs, again.

"And a judge," she murmured. Why did she feel so defensive? Nothing wrong with lawyers and judges.

"My mother weaves," she added. "And spins her own wool. I helped take care of the animals."

"Of course," Dake said finally.

"What's that supposed to mean?" she asked.

"You," he said flatly, "are like everybody else who went to Ransom College."

Her eyes widened a little. "And what," she repeated, "does *that* mean?"

"Well-to-do," he said with another shrug.

Melissa took a deep breath. "Look, Dake," she went on, "obviously you had a bad experience at Ransom. If we're going to be... If we're going to see each other, we can't just ignore that. Not with the job I have. You've got to tell me about it."

Dake looked at her steadily for a moment. "Okay," he began. "Bob Rudge approached me at the state track championships in Boulder. I'd had letters from lots of places by then, including Ransom, because I already held the national record in the four-forty. But he actually turned up at the meet. That impressed me."

Dake continued "I knew Ransom had a good team, I also knew it was a first-class college academically. I wanted a good education. It was very important to my parents, too. So we came to an agreement."

"I won a lot of races for Ransom the first two years, but there were some problems with the deal, as far as I was concerned. I had to live in a special dorm with the other scholarship athletes. And there was a lot of pressure to take certain courses, where professors were cozy with athletes. I'd come to Ransom for an education. I wasn't interested in that kind of game."

"We were monkeys on strings, Melissa. Just performing monkeys. If we'd been female, the women's movement would



have made us a prime cause."

"Well, I'm sorry that happened. But you *did* get a free education," Melissa said.

"Not quite," Dake answered quietly. "The problem with a dancing monkey is, if you can't dance anymore, they cut the string and leave you out there on your own."

His dark eyes were cloudy, and he was silent for a moment.

"I had the bad taste to get hurt the fall of my junior year. Tore an Achilles tendon during hurdles practice a few weeks before the indoor season started. Our Mr. Rudge told me to run in the first meet anyway. I tore the tendon again. I said no more races, at least until the following fall, and they said okay, no more money. Period. But enough, about me," he said. "Let's go see the hippos. They've always been my favorites."

She folded her arms in front of her. "That's not right. They took your scholarship away because you'd gotten hurt? Or because you refused to compete?"

Dake shrugged and jammed his hands into the pockets of his windbreaker. "It doesn't really matter, does it? Either way, I was out of funds."

Melissa shook her head. "But it *does* matter. If it was because you got hurt, that's simply wrong. It's not the athlete's fault if he's injured. But if it was because you wouldn't run once you were healed..."

"Dear lady, I might be walking around with a limp right now if I had."

"Is that what the doctors said?"

"You're a stubborn one, Mel," he said. "Okay. A doctor I trusted said that. It was *my* damn leg, after all. And now, fifteen years later, you wouldn't get any argument at all on it. In fact, it's likely I'd have surgery for the same injury."

"Well, then, why would Rudge make

you run?" Melissa asked.

"Unfortunately, Coach Rudge listened to a different doctor. *His* doctor said a couple of weeks' rest was all a torn tendon needed—that and a few shots of painkiller." He shrugged. "I was only twenty years old; I tried it their way once. When it tore again, I said no deal. No more for a full year."

Melissa wanted to believe him; she wanted it desperately.

"Melissa," Dake said softly, "Melissa... my beautiful Alice in Wonderland. Look around you. Try to see the real world."

Dake brought his face closer to hers, and she felt the churning inside, the urgent stirring of desire. If she kissed him, she knew she'd be lost.

She pulled back from him.

"You're talking about my being Alice. Seems to me it's *you* who's trying to live in Wonderland all the time." She put her hands into the pockets of her jacket. "Ransom College exists, Dake, whether you like it or not. You're going to have to acknowledge that sometime."

"Okay," he said finally. "This isn't gonna work. Let's go home."

They drove back to Ransom, and this time the silence was uncomfortable. Dake pulled the Fiat into the parking lot behind the administration building and switched off the ignition. He got out and walked around to her door.

"I guess," he said, "you can take the girl out of the college, but you can't take the college... and so on."

Melissa looked at him curiously through the open door before she got out. If only he weren't so damn handsome, she thought impatiently, this whole thing would be a lot easier.

She walked with him back to the driver's side and he got back in. With a smile that seemed to wrench the stability from Melissa's legs, he pulled the door

shut. "Thanks for your company," he called, his voice barely audible through the closed door. "Maybe I'll see you around sometime."

The engine started up, and he backed the car away. Melissa stood for a moment, watching. Then she turned and went back to her office.

Melissa ran six miles on Saturday, four more on Sunday, and at eleven o'clock Sunday night she cleaned her apartment from top to bottom. By Monday morning she felt refreshed, as though she had shaken Dake Quarry's unsettling influence off her shoulders. She was ready to confront him again, at least on paper.

She gave a quick wave to Jeff as she passed through his office to her own. He trailed after her.

"Good weekend?" he asked casually, the door still open behind him.

Melissa nodded. "Mmm. Lots of exercise."

Jeff smiled. "You need some new running shoes," he said with a pointed glance at the very old, very shabby sneakers on her feet. "You oughta try Windflame Runners."

Melissa made a face at him. "When I come into my inheritance," she said, "I'll buy some new shoes."

There was a knock on the partially open door, and Melissa looked up to see Robert Rudge's florid face poking round it.

"Morning, darlin'," he said with a grin. "Mind if I come in for a minute?"

"Of course not, Bob," she answered quickly before her instinctive dislike of him had time to move in. "Have a seat."

Bob Rudge breathed heavily as he rolled across the room and lowered his bulk into the comfortable chair across from Melissa's desk. Jeff gave them both a quick salute and disappeared into his office, closing the door behind him.

Melissa looked at Rudge with slightly raised eyebrows. "Yes?" she asked.

"Thought I might be of some help, ma'am," he said finally.

"How so?" she asked when Rudge didn't go on.

Rudge nodded. "I hear on the grapevine that Jack Warren wants you to make Mr. Dakin Quarry number one on the hit list."

"I had the impression that you and Dake Quarry weren't exactly best buddies. I'm not sure how you could—"

"That was then," he said, grinning again. "Now is now."

Melissa looked at him, covering her distaste with a polite smile. "There didn't seem to be much love lost between you two the other night, either," she responded.

"We're not talkin' love, darlin', we're talkin' business," the coach explained. "And what I've got to offer Mr. Quarry is a nice fat freshman class of runners who're all gonna need shoes. Now, I have considerable say in where they purchase those shoes. And I'm thinkin' we might provide a little bait for Mr. Quarry, if you catch my meaning."

Melissa looked down at the folder on her desk and opened it, thumbing through it absently without really seeing anything except the picture of Dake.

"The thing is," Rudge went on, "we have another kind of bait here to offer, too."

Melissa glanced up at him, and he winked broadly at her. "Some things never change, you know, darlin'. Quarry was always a skirt-chaser in college. Now, you, you got some very nice ammunition right there." He nodded toward her.

"Bob, I'm afraid I have different ideas about how to do my job than you have," Melissa said. "I appreciate your interest in all this, but I just don't work that way. Now if you'll excuse me..."

He nodded. "Okay. I surely wouldn't want to keep you from your work." He winked again, then turned and pushed his way out through the door.

Melissa looked after him for a moment, her hands clenched into tight fists at her sides. She was still staring at the door, when it opened again and Jeff's gentle face appeared around it.

"Boss?" he murmured. "Ready for company yet?"

Melissa blinked and unclenched her fists, then laughed. She shook her head. "I tell you, Jeff, I'm not sure what it is about that man. . . ."

Jeff nodded vigorously. "I know. He affects me the same way. But I think we're in a distinct minority. Everybody else around here seems to think he's some kind of saint."

She took a deep breath to clear her head. "So, what's new?" she asked.

Jeff held out a slip of paper. "Alan McAllister just called. Can't come to the tailgate party and the game next Saturday."

Jeff shifted his weight from one foot to the other and cleared his throat. "I have an idea," he said.

Melissa nodded. "Out with it."

"How about inviting Dake Quarry?"

Melissa blinked. The thought of actually seeing Dake again—in the flesh—within the week made her stomach do somersaults. But it would be business, strictly business. Probably he wouldn't come—she was patently aware that he wasn't much interested in her business. Still, if she could coax him out, he would meet the president, and maybe Warren's office could take over the hunt altogether.

"Actually, it's a good idea," she said.

She waited for Jeff to leave the office before dialing the number.

"Dake," she said tentatively, "it's Melissa. Melissa Markham. We're having a small reception next Saturday—very

small, just a handful of distinguished alumni, actually—before the football game. President Warren would like to invite you as his guest. To the reception. And to the game, too."

"I hate football."

"So do I," she agreed sincerely. "But I'd—" She stopped. I'd like to see you again, she had been about to say.

"You'd what?" He sounded as if he was about to laugh.

"I'm willing to go if you are," she said. "Deal?"

There was a tiny pause.

"Tell you what, Mel. I'll try. It's busy here like you wouldn't believe. Christmas and all. But I'll think over your proposal, and I'll see what I can do. Fair?"

Melissa nodded. "Okay," she agreed. "It is short notice. If you can make it, we'll be meeting at the south end of the parking lot outside the stadium. About twelve."

"Twelve o'clock, in the parking lot. Wear a red carnation, so if I come, I'll know which one you are."

Then, without even a good-bye, he hung up.

Melissa stared at the receiver for a moment longer. He hadn't said he'd come, but he hadn't said he wouldn't. And she wasn't at all certain which she wanted him to do.

On Saturday morning, with trembling hands, Melissa pulled on tan corduroy slacks, a cotton turtleneck, and a thick Irish-knit sweater. With a sigh, she stepped out onto the porch and locked the door.

At the edge of campus, students in sandwich boards were hawking banners and horns and big Ransom-red carnations. Melissa pulled a five-dollar bill out of her floppy shoulder bag and handed it to the boy with the carnations.

With the big red flower pinned securely

to one shoulder, she strode happily on toward the stadium

But Dake Quarry wasn't there. It was almost half an hour later, in fact, when the parking lot was almost full and dozens of tailgate picnics were in loud progress, that Melissa caught sight of his tall figure out of the corner of her eye.

"Hey, Mel!" he called when he got within calling distance.

He came to a stop in front of her, and Melissa felt the familiar shiver run through her as he patted her arm with one hand.

"Glad you could make it," she said, her voice loud above the noise of the crowd. "I'd about given up on you."

"Does this mean Ransom officially acknowledges me?" he asked. His mouth was tilted into a half-smile.

"Of course Ransom acknowledges you. Why not? Just because you pulled some pranks?"

Dake shrugged. "Because I never graduated," he said easily. Then his head rose and he looked around curiously. "I smell food," he added, and he headed for the buffet table.

For the next half hour, Melissa kept track of Dake, who was always, it seemed, one conversation away from her. It was clear that he was being perfectly charming; people were talking about him, and President Warren caught Melissa's arm to tell her how pleased he was that she had reeled in Dakin Quarry.

It was almost time for Melissa to head into the stands, but Dake was nowhere in sight. With a sigh, she walked to the darkened stairways leading to the stands, when Dake appeared behind her.

"How'm I doing?" he whispered. "Making a hit?"

"You're doing very well indeed," she whispered, "from what I hear."

"I've done my part," he said. "I've performed perfectly. I was nice to

everyone. Now I want my reward."

He moved closer, and Melissa felt the world begin to spin around her.

"Is that how you think all this operates?" she said sharply.

"No," he said. "I'm sorry, Mel. I don't mean that. 'I learned a lesson here. At Ransom. And I'm afraid I haven't forgotten it.' He hesitated a moment. 'Help me forget it, Mel,' he whispered. 'Help me understand that people can trust each other, and—'"

Melissa's lips parted just a little, and Dake leaned toward her.

"Dake, I can't," she whispered quickly. "I have to go to the game."

He stepped back. "Okay. But I'm sure as hell not going to any football game. Meet me afterward."

Impulsively, she reached into her shoulder bag and pulled out the key to her apartment. "Here," she said. "I live at 106 Elm. I'll meet you there after the game."

The door of the old house was unlocked when Melissa got back after the game later in the afternoon. Dake's leather flight jacket was hung on a hook at the top of the stairs under Melissa's small collection of hats, and his white running shoes, socks tucked neatly inside, were sitting by the door of the living room.

Dake himself was stretched out on the long couch, his bare feet propped up on its arm and a pillow under his head. He was holding a brochure that Melissa had been working on for class reunions the following spring, studying it critically.

"Welcome home," he said brightly.

"Hi," she answered breezily. "Thinking about coming to a reunion?" she asked, self-consciously casual. "It'll be your fifteenth."

"Am I allowed? As a non-graduate?" Dake inquired.

Melissa sat down in the overstuffed

chair across from the couch and pulled her boots off, then tucked her feet underneath her.

"Why didn't you graduate?" she asked.

"I *wanted* to graduate," he said slowly.

"Well, what happened?" Melissa said impatiently. "There must have been some other money around somewhere. You didn't need to quit just because they took your scholarship away."

"I didn't just quit," he said. "At first, when they took my money away, I thought I'd do about anything to stay at Ransom. I found a night job on the line at this little shoe factory near Elgin. It paid good money. But I needed a car to get to it, so my parents pulled together what they could and bought me one. Problem was, the whole thing ate away at my study time. My grades started down."

"My parents got nervous about the grades. They went into debt—way beyond a farmer's normal debt—so I could cut back on the time I worked. For spring semester, I went to part-time, and things were a little better. I figured it was doable. In the summer I pushed back up to full-time at the plant and found a room out there so I wouldn't have to commute."

He let his long, lithe body relax, sinking back against the couch.

"So anyway, then the car broke down," he went on. "And it was a bad year for sugar beets. There wasn't a farthing left in the pot. And that, as the saying goes, was that."

Melissa shook her head fiercely. "So *then* you quit? Without even giving Ransom a chance to help?"

Dake raised his eyebrows. "I was supposed to crawl back and offer—what? I'd told Rudge I'd be ready to run again the fall of my senior year, and he'd made it clear he wasn't interested. I was out of bargaining chips. And nobody paid much

attention when I didn't turn up in the fall."

How could nobody pay attention?" she asked. "How could they possibly not notice? You're one of the most noticeable people I've ever met."

Dake's eyes stayed steady on her own, and slowly, very slowly, a smile turned up the corners of his mouth. He rose from the couch, stepped around the coffee table, then let himself down gently onto his knees on the rug in front of her chair. He put both hands on the arms of the chair, catching her in the circle of his own arms without touching her. Then he buried his face in her lap.

"Oh, Dake," she whispered.

"I need you, Mel," he murmured.

If he had reached for her in the way she expected him to, pulling her face down to his for a kiss, she knew she might have said no. But instead he took his hands from the arms of the chair and lifted her heavy woolen sweater and the cotton turtleneck as well. Slowly, he leaned forward and kissed the naked ivory flesh just above her waist.

Melissa felt a harsh shudder race through her, unlike the small, pleasant shivers she had felt on other occasions from Dake's presence or his touch.

"Dake, please..." she began, but he looked up at her and smiled.

"Shh," he said softly.

Something at the very center of Melissa collapsed, some pocket of resistance. Suddenly there was a turbulence there, inside her, like a great windstorm.

His strong arms pulled her from the chair, holding her body hard against his own, and then lowered her gently onto the thick rug that covered the floor. Both silently removed their clothes.

Then Dake pulled Melissa down next to him on the thick rug, and their shaking hands explored each other's bodies. Melissa said his name softly and pressed

him to her, her hands against the flat of his back. Soon their bodies began to move together in a single rhythm, shifting this way and that in exquisite harmony, seeking satisfaction—as if they had always known each other, great wildcats raised together on the vast plains.

At last Dake rolled onto her and came to her, and the silken, muscular cats leaped in unison across some unthinkable chasm and landed together on the other side, panting, exhausted, agonizingly fulfilled. Melissa heard herself cry out his name.

Eventually, her heavy breathing began to slow, and Melissa shifted away from Dake's long body and flung her arms out to her sides.

After a moment, she glanced over at Dake. He was propped on one elbow, looking at her.

"You're beautiful," he said quietly.

"You too," she said softly.

The harsh urgency of their coming together had faded, and Melissa pushed herself up on her hands, then stood.

"I need some clothes," she said.

In the bathroom, she splashed cold water from her old marble pedestal sink onto her face. The full import of what she had done began taking root.

Just what is it that you think you're doing? she asked herself sharply. Making love with this guy breaks every professional rule you know. What the *hell* do you think you're doing?

She caught her own gaze in the mirror and sighed. Having a glorious time, she answered. The best time of my whole life.

On Monday morning, still in her jogging suit, Melissa headed for the field house, where the athletic department offices were housed.

"Susie," she panted to the secretary, breathless from her run to campus. "Mr. Rudge in?"

The pretty dark-haired girl nodded.

"Want to see him, Miss Markham?"

"Yes. If he has time."

Susie picked up the intercom phone, and a moment later the door swung open behind her and Robert Rudge appeared. He gestured Melissa into his thickly carpeted office.

"What can I do for you this morning, darlin'?"

"Bob," she said, "I was wondering about a few things. It's really none of my business, but—I was curious about a couple of things that have... come up. I wondered if athletes still live up at Harper, the way they used to when I was in school. And whether or not they're required to take specific schedules."

"Now, who you been talking to, darlin'? Don't you know you can't tell anybody *anything* anymore—not where to live, not what courses to take. The athletes don't live in Harper anymore. Now as to courses, well, we give advice, just like we've always done. Sometimes it seems to us that this boy or girl would get a little more out of school if they followed some particular plan of study. That's all. Just a little advice."

Melissa looked at him speculatively. "You mean there are certain professors who cater to athletes?"

"Nope," Rudge answered immediately. "Nobody caters. Anybody gets into Ransom deserves to be here."

"What about injuries?" Melissa asked.

Rudge leaned back in his chair. "I don't follow, missy."

"When someone gets hurt. Someone on scholarship. Do they lose the scholarship?"

Rudge's eyes narrowed. "Now who you been talkin' to?" he asked. "There're rules about that kind of—" Suddenly the folds of his eyelids rose so that his bright blue eyes were entirely visible for the first time. "You been talkin' to Mr. Dake Quarry! Haven't you now, darlin'? You



been talkin' to Mr. Quarry. Yessir."

Melissa took a deep breath. "Yes, as a matter of fact," she said, "I have. Mr. Quarry had a few complaints about the way scholarships were administered when he was here, and I thought, since he has a good deal of money to give, that I'd better check out—"

"I bet he did!" Rudge interrupted with a chuckle that was more like a wheeze. "I just bet he did. Well, Ransom College had a few complaints about Mr. Dake Quarry, too, darlin'. You can just bet we did."

"Like what?"

"Mr. Quarry wanted things his own way. Now he kept to training, I'll give him that. But he was a troublemaker. Played pranks. Complained. Chased the women some. Had a good eye for the women, I must say." He winked conspiratorially.

"Now we could forgive him his wild oats," Rudge went on, "because the boy sure could run. Thing we couldn't really forgive was that Mr. Quarry just didn't want to be coached. Didn't understand how the system worked. Nossir. And then he got hurt." He drummed the fingers of one hand on his desk for a moment. "Junior year, I think."

"He tore an Achilles tendon," Melissa said flatly.

Rudge nodded. "That was it. And he got temperamental about it. Real temperamental."

"He tore it a second time," she pushed on, "because he was forced to run too soon after the injury. And when he wouldn't compete anymore, you took his scholarship away."

Rudge rose partway out of his chair, then sat back again. He shook his head slowly, his eyes wide with innocence. "Nobody forced anybody, darlin'. Mr. Quarry refused to carry out his part of the scholarship contract, despite the opinion of our team physician. He let us down,

pure and simple. It was a fair decision."

"He had to leave school," she said a little less sharply. "He never even graduated. Because he didn't have the money to finish."

Rudge looked at her for a moment, his eyes wide and blue again. Then he exploded into laughter.

"Is that what he told you, darlin'?" he asked finally.

Melissa nodded, but the doubts were beginning to outweigh the anger. A frown furrowed her brow.

"Well, let me show you somethin'," Rudge said. He moved slowly over to an old gray metal filing cabinet at one side of the office.

"Here," he said finally, holding out a battered manila folder. "Let me show you somethin' here."

Inside was an article clipped from *Time* magazine some fifteen years earlier. The headline was *Sports: How to Make an Easy Million*. She glanced at it quickly—something about Americans playing basketball in Italy.

"I don't understand," she said, looking up at Rudge.

"Right down there in the last paragraph."

Melissa looked down again. Listed among the Americans who had come to Italy to make their millions was Dakin Quarry. She read the paragraph through twice.

"Now." Rudge put both fat hands on his desk, palms down. "Mr. Quarry told you he left here because he was broke. But two months later he was playin' pro ball in Italy and livin' like a king. Are you gonna tell me he didn't have that offer in his hand when he quit college?"

Melissa folded the article slowly and placed it back in the open manila folder. She brushed an imaginary piece of lint off her jogging pants, then stood up.

"Thanks very much, Bob," she said,

holding out a hand to shake. "You've been very helpful."

"Well," he added, "you just come back when you need more. Old coach is always here."

Melissa could still hear his wheezing as she disappeared out the door of his office.

Back in her own office, she hurried past Jeff with a quick "Good morning" and collapsed into her chair. No matter how complex the conflict between job and emotions, she had never really doubted Dake's truthfulness. But if he had lied to her about his reasons for leaving Ransom...

She had consolidated the various information on Dake Quarry into one file folder. Now she pulled the file to the center of her desk and skimmed through it one more time. There was no hint here of why he had left school. His transcript showed the slipping grades in his third year, and then the information simply stopped. No more course grades, no more items in the paper.

On top of the file was a note from President Warren, written to confirm his first phone call about Dake Quarry. *Full speed ahead*, it urged. Melissa studied it for a moment. "I really wanted a Ransom degree," she heard Dake saying. With a little sigh, she made a note across the bottom of the president's memo: *Never graduated*, she wrote. *Honorary degree as bait?*

She smiled a little wanly. Just doing her job, she told herself firmly.

Sitting in the middle of Melissa's desk on Monday morning was a thick, unfamiliar folder. Some of the papers inside were covered with figures—copies, apparently, of account records. Others seemed to be letters—recruitment letters—and copies of notes about specific students. The headings indicated that everything she was looking at had come

from the athletic department.

"Jeff!" she called, punching the button on her desk as she realized what was in front of her.

Jeff ambled in.

She glared at him, waving a hand at the papers now spread over her desk. "What on earth is this stuff? And where on earth did you get it?"

He smiled a little smugly.

"I've been doing a little investigating. On my own time," he added. "It's been an evening and weekend sort of project."

Melissa stared at the papers and shook her head slowly.

"Enough to lose Rudge his job, if anybody with any sense of decency is in charge around here," he said happily.

"Are you implying that Rudge... just what *are* you implying?"

Jeff shrugged. "I wouldn't want to imply anything at all, boss. But there are a few requisitions for funds for equipment that just don't seem to exist. And then there's the assistant coach who promised an incoming lineman that he'd never have to worry about grades at Ransom. And what looks to me like a fudged transcript for last year's star linebacker. You just kind of read through these things, and they tend to speak for themselves."

"Doesn't he get audited every year?"

Jeff shook his head. "Our friend Mr. Coach pretty much has things his own way, it appears. No audits. Some deal he worked out with the president before Warren arrived on the scene."

Melissa rolled her eyes. "Jeff, I can't believe you. But we've got no business fooling around with all this. You should take it right on over to Warren's office."

"I don't think I'm the proper person," Jeff said with a shake of his red curls. "I think it should come from someone he knows and trusts. Like you."

Melissa sighed. "This does not make me happy."

Jeff frowned. "Boss, listen. This guy Rudge has run amok for years, apparently. He's wasted the college's money, and he's deprived the students he's recruited from taking full advantage of a Ransom education. Think of it that way. And now you have the chance to blow the whistle. Or at least to start some people thinking about what's been going on."

Melissa looked down at the papers and studied them for a moment longer. "You're right, Jeff. If this stuff proves what you say, then it's important. I'll see if I can get an appointment with Warren before he leaves for the holidays."

"It is important," she said softly as she dialed the phone.

When she heard the president's booming voice answer, she said, "Dr. Warren, there's something I think I need to talk to you about. Could you fit in an appointment sometime tomorrow?"

There was a groan at the other end of the line. "Why does everything urgent happen the week before Christmas? I'm sorry, Melissa, but it'll just have to wait until after the holidays."

"Okay," she said. "Anyway, that'll give me more time to go through the material I want to show you and get a real report together."

"Good girl," the president said. "Say," he added, his tone jovial once again, "whatever happened with that fellow Quarry?"

"Actually, that's another thing I wanted to talk to you about," Melissa said. "I'm finding him . . . very difficult. I just can't seem to get a handle on him. I think maybe I should turn him over to you. Or Phil Donlon."

"Well," Warren finally responded, "we'll talk about that after the holidays as well. Whatever's bothering you."

"Right," she agreed quietly. "We'll talk about it after the holidays. Have a nice vacation."

Melissa turned her attention to the folder on Rudge. A moment later the phone rang. It was Dake.

"Mel, how about a weekend off by ourselves? Somewhere we're guaranteed privacy. Just us."

"We do need to talk things out," she said. "I have some questions that need answering. And I've found out some things about Rudge. I mean, I have some documents. But I can only spare a day. It's very busy here."

"And a night," he answered softly, his voice a caress.

"Give me directions," she agreed. "I'll come out to your place after work on Friday."

It was almost seven when Melissa pulled her old green Pontiac into the driveway of Dake's, restored nineteenth-century farmhouse. He was waiting at the front door with a duffel bag in his hand.

"I had the impression we were staying here," she said, pointing at the duffel.

"I decided it should be neutral ground. Not yours, not mine."

He scooped her overnight bag from the backseat of her car and deposited it in his Fiat.

"Where'd you have in mind?" she asked as he gestured her in the front seat. He got into the car and pulled out of the driveway.

"Lake Geneva," he said finally.

An hour later Dake pulled the green Fiat into a lane that wound between two high snowbanks down toward the moonlit lake. Set way back on either side of the narrow road were log cottages, mere shadows in the dark night. Curls of smoke rose from the chimneys of two or three. Dake pulled into the cleared space in front of a larger building just at the lakeshore.

The night was velvety black, but the

white moonlight reflected off the icy sheen of the lake with a brilliance that made everything luminescent.

"Dake," she said finally, "thank you. This is beautiful." Her voice was soft with awe.

Dake nodded, his grin seeming to stretch from one ear to the other. "I know. All part of my master plan."

Their cabin was sparsely furnished but comfortable, with rag rugs and a huge overstuffed sofa in front of a blazing fireplace.

After they'd settled in, they began working on their dinner. They tossed a salad, and Dake uncorked the first of two bottles of wine he had brought along. Melissa sat on the couch in front of the fire and watched Dake as he forked steaks off the grill and onto plates.

"Ready to eat?" he asked.

She nodded.

Firelight prised through their crystal wineglasses, making the rich burgundy sparkle with tiny, dancing pinpoints of light. It seemed to Melissa that she had never been happier in all her life.

When they had finished, they pushed the table away and lay back against the couch, watching the fire, holding hands.

"You said on the phone that you had questions to ask," he said after several moments of silence.

Melissa rubbed her brow. "Well, I'm afraid this is about Rudge. I went to see him, to ask about all the things you said. About how scholarship athletes are treated and all that." The words came out in a rush, almost tumbling over one another.

"Rudge says you left school to play pro basketball in Italy. Not because you couldn't afford it anymore. He says your poor-little-farm-boy story is pure fairy tale."

Dake dropped her hand and rose ab-

ruptly. "I told you I'd played basketball in Europe. You *knew* that. Why would you believe him and not me?"

She blinked away the first hint of a tear.

"I left Ransom for exactly the reasons I told you," Dake said. "I was broke. My family was broke. When I got back to Colorado, I spent about a month on the farm, and that was hell for everybody. I didn't want to be there, and my parents were so depressed it was killing them."

He stared at the floor for a moment, then looked back at Melissa. "They wanted me to graduate from college. So I went over to State in Fort Collins to register. I ran into a guy I'd played basketball against in high school. He was heading for Italy to play ball. He suggested I come along."

"I played for twelve years, got married briefly to an Italian model, and put enough money in the bank to come back here and buy my factory. I've been manufacturing my special shoes ever since. End of story."

"It sounds very tidy," she said.

"Very neat. Except that I never got the college degree. Which happened to be the one thing I really wanted. My parents never quite got over that disappointment. I don't think I'll ever forgive Bob Rudge for that."

Suddenly he leaned forward and brought his mouth to hers. The pressure of his mouth grew harder. Then he leaned and scooped her up in his arms. Melissa lay back in his arms as he carried her through the open doorway into the bedroom.

An hour later, when Dake finally climbed out of the bed and disappeared into the kitchen, Melissa was only dimly aware of his absence. She lay back against the pillows, smiling, satisfied, ready for sleep.

The drive home the next morning from

Lake Geneva was as idyllic as their stay in the cabin had been. To crown their idyll, Dake had a suprising bit of news on the way home.

Melissa was driving. Dake was lounging in his seat, enjoying the scenery.

"Melissa," he said finally, "there is something I've been meaning to tell you. Maybe it will ease some of your conflict about your professional duties and your relationship with me."

"I'm listening," Melissa said.

"I've been back in Chicago for about three years," Dake began. "And I've been thinking about Ransom on and off that whole time. My business has made a whole lot more money than I ever expected. It's really more than I need."

"What about your parents?" she asked. "Do they need your help?"

Dake smiled. "That was my first priority. Right now they may be the only farmers in the entire country without a single debt."

"So," he continued after a moment, "the point is, even after debts and investments, I have all this money. And a year or so ago, I began thinking that maybe I should give Ransom something. To help out kids like I was once."

Melissa nodded, listening intently.

"Last spring I ran into an old teacher of mine downtown. Professor Goldman. English?"

Melissa nodded. "I know him," she said.

"We both had places to get to, but we talked a little about Ransom. The money situation for scholarships and all that. I decided then it was time, so I took a hundred thousand dollars and put it into an escrow fund with my lawyer, to be transferred to Ransom in one year."

Melissa looked at him curiously. "Why not just donate the money outright? You could have earmarked it for student assistance or whatever you like."

"I was hedging my bets."

Melissa sat up abruptly. "You mean you didn't trust the college to—"

"Why should I?" Dake interrupted, a sudden edge to his voice. "My own experience wasn't very promising."

Dake turned away and looked out the window.

"Not very long after I found the dinner invitation in my mail. At the last minute I decided to go. And then the first thing that got tossed at me was that this stadium was going to be named after Robert Rudge."

Dake looked steadily at Melissa. "Mel, I thought I was over it. But I'd forgotten how much I despised that man."

He turned toward the window again in silence.

"Look, Mel," he said after a moment. "You told me the other day that you know something about Bob Rudge. How about showing me what you've got? Maybe we can work from there."

"Okay," she agreed. "Let's go over to the office as soon as we get back to town."

It was odd, being at the office when no one else was there. Dake pushed open the door to Melissa's office. Melissa switched on the overhead light, then sat down in her desk chair and glanced at a handful of pink phone message slips. Dake thumbed idly through the stack of file folders in her pending basket.

"Hey, here's me," Dake said playfully, holding up the familiar folder. Melissa glanced at him. "All the inside information?" he asked, his voice light and teasing.

Melissa reached for the folder, but he pulled it away. "Not much of interest," she said with a shrug. "Records of all your arrests as an undergraduate. Lists of your harlots. That sort of thing."

She stood halfway up and reached

across the desk, but Dake kept the folder out of reach. He spread it open at one corner of the desk and began turning over pages slowly, back to front.

Melissa made a note on her calendar, then began poking through the pile of folders herself, looking for the one Jeff had assembled on the athletics department.

"Here we go," she said after a moment. "this is the stuff that—"

"What's this?" Dake interrupted. He had stopped turning pages. He put both hands flat on the desk and leaned over the file, studying it.

"What's what?"

Melissa stood and came around the desk so she could see what he was looking at. A tiny flicker of misgiving ran through her. "Oh, that's a memo from Warren," she said casually, but keeping the lightness in her voice was suddenly an effort.

Dake continued to stare at the paper. "What's this about an honorary degree?" he asked. His voice was quiet and steady, without a trace of emotion as he read aloud the words she had scrawled across the bottom. "Honorary degree as bait."

He looked up at her. The flicker of misgiving had become a storm; her whole body felt wracked with it.

"Dake, I wrote that a while ago," she said. "Just after you first told me you hadn't graduated. It seemed like a possibility—"

He interrupted, "And you were pretty sure it would work, weren't you? Because I'd told you how much that degree meant to me."

Melissa continued to shake her head, almost automatically. "Dake, that's not it at all. You *have* to try to understand. I had a job to do."

"Had a job to do," he repeated. "So what've you been doing, taking notes all along? You just kept pecking away until you found the weak spot, didn't you."

Mel? There it was. And all the time I thought you were falling in love with me."

He closed the folder and pushed it back toward the center of the desk, then looked at her. The lines of his face were sharply carved, as if from a block of ice, and his eyes were blank.

"Well thanks anyway, Mel," he said evenly, "but I'm not interested. You can keep your fancy honorary degree, and you can keep your research files, and you can keep Ransom College. Sorry to say, it just didn't work. The whole damn thing."

"Damn it, Dake," she said, "be fair. Think about what I've been juggling all this time."

"*Fair* is not a word I've associated with this place in the past," he said coldly. "I was stupid to think I could start now." Then he turned and walked away, out the door.

And out of my life, Melissa thought.

Just two days before Christmas, Melissa decided to drive home for the holidays.

As the flat countryside slid by, she thought about the manila envelope she had pushed under President Warren's door late the afternoon before. She wondered idly if it had been the right thing to do, passing on her summary of the athletics department file without a personal meeting with the president. But her cover memo had requested a meeting as soon as Warren returned from vacation, and that, Melissa told herself with a sigh, was the best she could do.

There was a light snow on Christmas Day, and the farm looked its beautiful best. In the loving midst of her sisters and brother and their families, she could almost forget about Dake Quarry and Robert Rudge.

It was only in the evening, when her siblings had retreated to their nearby



homes and the house was quiet again, that she thought about Dake—thought about his smile, so innocent and caring; thought about the warmth of his touch; thought about the strength of his body next to hers.

No amount of hoopla could make her mother miss the signs of her daughter's desolation. Melissa was only partially successful in fending off her questions, and her father, gruffly sympathetic, wrapped his arms around her and insisted that she stay through the first of the year.

On the second day of the new year, exhausted from the eight-hour drive back and feeling just a little empty inside, Melissa unlocked the downstairs door of her apartment building.

A batch of Christmas cards were in her mailbox along with a package wrapped in silver foil and tied with a red ribbon.

Upstairs in her apartment, she opened and read all the cards before turning to the present. Finally she pulled the gleaming paper carefully off. It was a shoebox. The stylized Windflame logo was on its lid, and inside was a pair of running shoes—Ransom red and white, with a golden lightning bolt down the side.

Melissa stared at them for a long time. Then she reached for the phone almost mechanically and dialed Dake's home number, but no one answered.

There was an ache inside her belly that felt as if it would never go away.

The ache was still there the next day when she made her way to her office across the slush that now covered the campus. Jeff was waiting, as usual, at his desk.

"So what's going on here?" she asked, moving on toward her own office. "Anything new?"

He trailed after her, a note in his hand. "Yep. Big doings," he said, handing her

the paper. "The phone was ringing when I walked in the door this morning."

Melissa glanced at the message.

"Warren?" she said skeptically. "I thought he wasn't supposed to be back on campus for two weeks. He's here? And he wants to see me now?"

Jeff nodded. "That was the word. At nine. Donna, his secretary, sounded kind of grim."

Melissa frowned. "Donna say what it was about?"

"Uh-uh. Nothing. It's all very mysterious."

Melissa looked at him as she settled into the chair behind her desk. "Well, it must be the athletics stuff. I left the summary under Warren's door, and I asked for an appointment as soon as he got back."

She thumbed through the stack of folders that sat on one side of her desk, hesitated, then went back through them again more slowly.

"Jeffrey," she said sharply, looking up, "did you do something with that file? The one you made up on Rudge?"

His eyes widened, and he shook his head. "It was right there in that pile the last time I saw it."

"It's gone," she said evenly. "Someone's taken it. Someone's been in here over vacation. Without that file, there's no reason for anyone to believe..."

The fear in her stomach turned in on itself and formed a knot, hard and huge.

"I'm going on over there, Jeff," she said, pulling her jacket back off its hook. "See you whenever."

The old stone house that held the president's office was directly across the quadrangle, but Melissa's nose was already frozen by the time she reached the front door. Bob Rudge's beach-ball frame was parked comfortably on a sofa in the president's waiting room. She nodded a terse greeting, and he grinned.

"Mornin', missy. You got the sum-

mons, too?" he asked.

A buzzer sounded, and the president's secretary picked up her intercom and listened for a moment. Then she stood up.

"You can both go in now," she said with a smile at Melissa that Melissa could only interpret as sympathetic.

Rudge pushed the door open and politely gestured Melissa in ahead of him. Jack Warren stood behind his big wooden desk, a picture-postcard view of the main quadrangle out the window behind him. Melissa saw with surprise that Alan McAllister already occupied one of the big leather chairs in the office.

"Dr. Warren," she said, reaching over the desk to shake his hand. "We didn't expect you back on campus for another couple of weeks."

Warren shook his head. "Things came up," he said tersely. "You had a nice holiday?"

"Yes," she answered as casually as she could. "I didn't decide to go home until a couple of days before Christmas. I just got back last night."

Warren was nodding. "That explains why we couldn't get hold of you," he said. His normally booming voice was pitched a little lower than usual.

He waved toward a chair, and Melissa sat down, grateful for the support. The three men followed her lead and sat down.

"Could I ask," she said in a crisp and businesslike tone, "what this is all about?"

The president cleared his throat and swiveled his chair around for a moment so he could look out the big window. Then he turned back and faced the others.

"It has always been my belief," he began formally, "that institutions of higher learning should serve as models in all respects for their students. We must not only provide quality teachers, but everything we do, all our actions, must be

absolutely above reproach."

Melissa closed her eyes briefly. So Rudge got to him, she thought. So Rudge explained I'm sleeping with Dake Quarry as a fund-raising tactic. And Warren believed him. When she opened her eyes again, she looked steadily at the president.

"Even we as administrators," he went on, "must be ethically and morally sound. Not to mention legally."

Melissa blinked. Legally? Surely there was no question of a *legal* problem...

Behind her, she heard the door to the president's office open softly. Alan McAllister to her right raised a hand in greeting. She glanced at Rudge. He sat frozen in his seat, and his small eyes were focused on the newcomer.

Whoever had entered the room stood almost directly behind her; there was no way she could see who it was without twisting entirely around in her chair.

President Warren rose. "Quarry!" he said, booming out his greeting in a more normal tone. "I was afraid we'd have to do without you!"

Melissa angled herself around. Dake stood just inside the door of the office, and Melissa gulped. She took in a deep breath. She could feel her heartbeat quicken, and she rubbed damp palms against her wool skirt. The she wove her fingers together and pressed her hands into her lap, taming the instinct of her body to leap up and take hold of him, to gather him into her arms and never let him go.

Dake nodded at her. He was smiling, and it was the same remarkable smile she had first seen months before; it lent his lean and shadowed face the innocence of a small boy.

"Come and have a seat. We've really just started," president Warren insisted.

From the corner of her eye, Melissa saw Dake settle his tall frame into a chair to Rudge's left.

"Let me be a little more specific now," Warren went on. "Just before Christmas, I suddenly got bombarded with urgent messages from people who had to see me immediately. Melissa wanted an appointment about something very important. Mr. McAllister here wanted a meeting as soon as possible. Coach Rudge hinted that he had some vital information for me."

He waved a hand in the air. "As you all know, I was planning a vacation in Vermont." Warren's tone was suddenly dry. "So I turned everybody down. But apparently that wasn't quite good enough for anybody but Melissa. Melissa simply put her information in writing and slid it under my door, for me to look at after Christmas. The rest of you..."

Melissa glanced around quickly. So the envelope had reached Dr. Warren. But without the backup information in the file, all the charges she had made in her memo were worthless.

Warren nodded at Rudge, and the coach shifted his massive body a little. "First of all, there was Bob," the president went on. "Bob attended a luncheon with me in New York, just before the holidays. He managed to whisper something in my ear about some... improper behavior on the part of Ms. Markham. Something about the methods she was using in approaching Mr. Quarry. Now this wasn't something I necessarily accepted at face value," he added quickly, clearly uncomfortable, "although I had seen..." He swiveled away again and cleared his throat. "Well, I did inadvertently observe a rather warm exchange once. That day at the football game."

Melissa glanced at Dake, wide-eyed, but he was staring at the president attentively.

"Dr. Warren," she said firmly, "I told you I was having some... difficulty with

Mr. Quarry. I told you that before Christmas. That I wanted you to take over."

Warren nodded. "Yes, you did. And I was by then aware of what sort of difficulty it was. Frankly, I would have let the whole thing drop," he went on, still facing the window, "if Mr. Quarry hadn't turned up in New York, too."

Melissa turned to stare at Dake. "New York?" she murmured. Dake glanced at her and smiled, then turned back toward Warren.

The president swiveled his chair back. "In the course of talking with Mr. Quarry about a major donation, I... uh... I raised the question of impropriety." His voice was muted, almost a mumble. "I have been made aware of the existence of an escrow fund. A hundred-thousand-dollar escrow fund, put aside for Ransom last spring—well before Ms. Markham ever set eyes on Mr. Quarry, as I understand it."

"So of course the whole issue was ridiculous," Warren concluded with a quick smile at Melissa. "But in the meantime, Mr. McAllister had *also* turned up in New York."

The president rolled his eyes. "You can see what was happening to my vacation," he added. "In any case, both Alan and Mr. Quarry, independent of each other, raised some serious charges about the way you run things over there in the fieldhouse, Bob."

Melissa blinked. McAllister? And Dake?

Warren turned his chair slightly so that he was looking directly at Rudge. He put his elbows on the desk and pressed his fingertips together. "Mr. McAllister had been concerned about it for some time, and he felt finally there was an urgent need for some kind of investigation. Mr. Quarry suggested that that investigation had already been at least partly under-

taken—by Ms. Markham's office."

Rudge turned toward Melissa and glared, his bright blue eyes suddenly wide. "Now I don't think—" he began.

"Let me finish, Bob. I'm afraid I was very concerned about the seriousness of some of the charges being made. I came back to campus immediately after Christmas." He sighed deeply. "So much for Vermont."

"In any case," he continued, "I came back to find an envelope from Melissa under my office door, containing a cogent summary of some pieces of information her assistant had collected. Some very serious allegations."

He nodded at Melissa, and she felt her bones melt into the cushions of her chair. Here it comes, she told herself with a sigh. Now comes the part where he asks for my evidence.

"I couldn't get hold of you," Warren said in a voice that sounded much too casual to Melissa's hypersensitive ears, "so I took the liberty of having Donna hunt down the folder in your office." He smiled at Melissa. "I'm sorry. No one was around, and we couldn't reach you anywhere."

Melissa felt as if a huge weight had suddenly been lifted from her, and she straightened her shoulders. She shook her head numbly. "I just noticed it was gone," she said.

Alan leaned toward her. "I'd been nosing around all fall, Melissa," he chimed in, "and I had some information, too. But not as much as you." He turned in his chair to look at Rudge. "The only reason Mr. Rudge was permitted to carry on for so long was that the president before Jack had a soft spot for winning teams. But when I started getting really involved in alumni affairs, after Jack arrived... well, some of us felt that winning teams don't mean much unless it's being done the right way."

Melissa looked at Alan. "Really, I didn't have anything to do with it," she said weakly. "I just mentioned the possibility. My secretary Jeffrey did it all."

"You pulled it together into a coherent case, Melissa. That's what we needed," Alan said.

Suddenly Rudge was on his feet, the heavy flesh of his chins trembling. "I've done nothing illegal," he said, his tone challenging. "Not a thing. You can comb those records from here to kingdom come. I think this young lady has gotten in way over her pretty head."

President Warren rose from his chair, both hands on the desk. "You're right, of course, Bob. As of yet we've found no technical illegalities. But morally and ethically, your actions, your leadership..." He shook his head sadly. "We are terminating your contract as of today, Bob."

Rudge's breathing had turned into a steady wheeze. "I've won more games for this place—" he blustered, then stopped.

Warren shook his head. "Winning isn't everything, Bob. As a coach, you should know that better than anyone. You might want to start getting your things organized now."

Rudge's round, rubbery body seemed to deflate as he collapsed briefly back into his chair. Then he pulled himself up to his feet and, with a nod at Warren, another at McAllister and a quick glare at Melissa, left the room.

"First time I've ever seen him without something to say," Alan muttered.

"Well," Warren said after a moment, "I guess that's that. Thank you all for coming. Melissa, I'm sorry we had to insult you by taking Rudge's insinuations seriously, even for a moment."

"No apologies necessary," she said.

"Except from me," Duke's deep voice broke in. "As usual. I am apologizing one

more time. God knows, I hope it'll be the last."

"Oh, no," Melissa answered quickly, shaking her head sharply. "You really don't need... it's..."

Dake grinned at her. "Get my present?" he asked, seemingly oblivious to her discomfort.

Melissa glanced at the other two men. They were smiling broadly, and she focused her embarrassed gaze on her hands, still resting in her lap. "Not until last night," she muttered. "Thank you. I tried to call, but there wasn't any answer."

"I was in Colorado for Christmas. With my parents." He took hold of the tie and held it out for her inspection. "My mother's taken up weaving," he said easily. "Just like yours."

"I didn't get in until late last night," Dake went on cheerily. "The shoes were a peace offering. I brought them by on Christmas Eve, but you weren't around."

"A peace offering?" she repeated.

"Yep."

He rose. He was several inches taller than Jack Warren, and he seemed to fill the office with his strength. He took a step toward the desk and turned, so he could see Melissa clearly.

"I had a bad experience at this college once," he said slowly. "As everyone here knows. The bad things I learned here stayed with me for fifteen years."

He braced a hip against the president's desk. "But over the course of the last few months, since I've renewed my association with Ransom to some degree, I've been very impressed with the new people in charge here. President Warren, Alan..." He waved a hand at the two men, and then at Melissa. "Mel."

"I'm... sorry the honorary degree business offended you, Dake," she murmured, no longer so self-conscious about the others in the room. "It seemed like a good idea at the time."

"Hey," he said a little impatiently, "this is *my* apology. You can't have it. Anyway, I've thought the whole thing over, and I've decided that I might just *accept* that offer. If it's officially made, of course," he added with a nod at President Warren. "My parents kind of liked the idea."

He grinned at Melissa. "The thing is, Jack's told me that Ransom now gives credit for some kinds of life experience, and I'm thinking that maybe we could work out a deal..."

"A deal!" Melissa cried without thinking, pushing herself halfway out of her chair. "Please, Dake, no more deals!"

Suddenly Alan McAllister laughed out loud. She turned to look at him.

"I'm sorry," Alan said, a little breathless from his own merriment. "That just sounded so heartfelt, Melissa—it struck my funnybone. I gather that's a sore subject between you two,"

Melissa nodded gravely. But Dake was smothering a smile of his own, and Melissa let the intensity of her response wash away in the face of their amusement.

Dake placed a hand on Melissa's shoulder, his thumb just grazing the side of her throat. Her inhibitions dissolved, she tilted her head a little and rubbed her cheek against the back of his hand.

"Anyway," he said, "The fact is, I might not really need another degree." The pressure of his hand strengthened just a little, and Melissa felt a tiny charge of electricity race through her. "I'm very much hoping to add both a B.A. and an M.B.A. to my family real soon."

He leaned to let his lips graze Melissa's hair. She looked happily up at him, then quickly at Alan and Jack Warren. She was fully aware that her cheeks were now blazing red.

"I think that might be arranged," she said softly. ♥

# Invitation To A Dream

A DIGEST  
ORIGINAL

*Brieda Coyle is sent to Paris on business in order to recover illustrations from temperamental artist, Ryan Crandell. But business quickly mixes with pleasure and Brieda faces a dilemma: Is she falling in love with a married man?*

EVE LONDON

What time is it in Paris?" Mrs. Brandyse, Brieda's boss, called from her office. She wasn't one for intercoms. She preferred yelling, a more immediate form of communication. It had the extra advantage of always keeping her employees a little on edge.

Bridget Coyle, nicknamed Brieda, looked at her watch. It was eight in the morning.

"It's two o'clock in Paris."

"AM or PM?" Lizabeth Brandyse bellowed.

"Afternoon," Brieda returned.

"He ought to be up by now."

"Who?"

"When does your passport expire?"

Brieda put aside the manuscript she had been proofing. She could tell this was going to be an extended conversation.

"June, 1994."

"Good. You don't have any plans this

weekend, do you?"

Even though she couldn't see their faces, Brieda could feel other ears in the office listening. The only privacy Mrs. Brandyse respected was her own.

"Would you like me to come into your office, Mrs. Brandyse?" Brieda stood, making sure the silk tie around her neck was neat.

"Yes. I can't find Ryan Crandell's number in Paris anywhere. Oh, here it is."

Brieda walked down the long hall to Mrs. Brandyse's office. The corner windows on the eighteenth floor gave a spectacular view of midtown Manhattan. The Persian rugs and Victorian furnishings had an intimidating quality that didn't soften with familiarity. Brieda entered the lioness's den and sat in the leather wing chair in front of the imposing oak desk.

"No, Mrs. Brandyse, I didn't have anything special planned for this weekend, but I had set aside the time to go through my closets. . ."

Mrs. Brandyse ignored her. She spotted Mary, her secretary, sneaking past her door with a cup of coffee in hand.

"Mary! Is that coffee for me?"

Mary entered and handed her the cup that was obviously meant for herself.

"Get me Paris." Mrs. Brandyse handed Mary the slip of paper with the number written on it. Mary glanced at it and became visibly flushed.

"Ryan Crandell?" she cooed. "I'd be delighted to."

"I'm sure," Mrs. Brandyse scowled.

"Is it true he got married?"

"I'm not sure, but he does seem to be 'tied up' with someone."

Mary shot Brieda a look to see if she knew anything about this. Brieda shrugged, indicating her ignorance. Mary left the room. And no sooner had she done so than Mrs. Brandyse changed her mind.

"Mary! Hold the call a few minutes. I

want to go over a few details with Brieda first."

"Yes, Mrs. Brandyse," Mary answered from the corridor.

"Ryan Crandell. He's the illustrator for our *Herr Hare* series, isn't he?" Brieda asked.

Mrs. Brandyse nodded over her coffee cup. "How's your French?"

"It was pretty good in high school."

"Well, you have a couple of days to brush up." Mrs. Brandyse was searching through the papers on her desk. She excavated the airplane tickets she was looking for. Brieda was used to having Mrs. Brandyse reveal details at her own pace, but she was really beginning to wonder what she had in mind now.

"Do you have a credit card?"

"Yes."

"Good. That's all you really need."

"Mrs. Brandyse, what's going on?"

"I've been thinking about it, and I've decided to send you to Paris."

"What?" was all Brieda could muster.

"As you know, I was planning to fly to Paris tomorrow myself, but we're having the country house painted, my husband has the flu, and I just don't think this is the right time for me to go. Besides, the more I think about it, the more I realize it's not going to be just a four-day trip."

"Well! Paris! That's . . . great." Brieda's words came out slowly; she was still in shock. "But when would I have to leave?"

"Tomorrow night at seven. JFK Airport. I'll send our car to your apartment to pick you up. How's four-thirty?"

Brieda just stared at her. After three years of working for Brandyse and Conrad she had come to expect the unexpected, but this one took the cake.

"Now aren't you glad you don't have any pets?" Mrs. Brandyse smiled. This was apparently her idea of softening the news.



"Mrs. Brandyse, of course I'm thrilled, it's just it's so... so sudden."

"Yes, I know. The glamorous world of publishing."

It was anything but glamorous. Brieda had worked long hard days for three years. She was still reading manuscripts, rating whether or not they should be read by Mrs. Brandyse. But after all, she was now reading a better group of manuscripts. Others were reading the slush pile to determine whether or not Brieda should read them.

"So you'll go?"

"Well, if you need me to, I guess..."

"Good. Mary! Get Ryan on the phone for me," she called. "As you know," she continued to Brieda, "we're doing a third *Herr Hare*, and we've asked Ryan to do the illustrations. Believe me, if there was someone else, anyone else, who could do them as nicely, I would gladly pay twice the price."

"Mr. Crandell's drawings *are* quite special."

Mary called from the other room to say that Ryan was on the line. Mrs. Brandyse picked up the phone and listened.

"Mary! You can flirt with Mr. Crandell on your own time. *Bonjour*, Ryan. Yes. Flight 247 arrives at Orly at nine in the morning Paris time. Good. Listen, I can't come, but I'm sending my assistant Miss Bridget Coyle. Yes. I said *mademoiselle*. I trust that she will come back with the illustrations in hand. You know you've missed the deadline! Need I remind you we have a contract? You've been paid your advance and I... Yes. You'll pick her up at the airport? Flight 247. Write it down. She has red hair. What? Yes, she is." Mrs. Brandyse rolled her eyes. Brieda wondered what his question had been. "Did you write the flight number? Yes. Ryan, flattery will get you nowhere with me."

Brieda watched with amazement as

Mrs. Brandyse's face visibly softened. She was now more curious than ever about the kind of man who could lower Mrs. Brandyse's defenses even one notch.

"Now, Ryan, Miss Coyle is a very serious young lady. She is coming there on business. Yes, I'm sure you will. *Au revoir*, Ryan."

Mrs. Brandyse hung up, and Brieda could still see a trace of a smile slowly fade from her lips. She hoped Mary had listened in on the conversation; she was dying to know what it was *he* had said to Mrs. Brandyse. The boss interrupted her musings.

"Brieda, why don't you take the day off. I'm sure you have a few things to get in order before your trip."

"How long will I be gone?" Brieda asked. It still hadn't really sunk in that she was going across the ocean tomorrow night.

"That depends on you. I know you take your work very seriously. I have watched you carefully these past three years."

"Yes, I know you have." Brieda softened her comment with a smile.

"Well, you must realize that Sheila, or for that matter, every other girl in this office, would give their eyeteeth to go to Paris and work with Ryan Crandell. Even if he is... 'involved' with that woman."

Brieda nodded politely, but she wondered if that was really true. She had heard from Sheila that Crandell was quite temperamental. She wondered if there might be other reasons why Mrs. B. wasn't going, besides the ones she had given.

"Brieda, if you do well on this assignment, I can assure you it will go a long way towards my decision about a promotion. I know you realize that both you and Sheila are up for the same slot."

"Yes. We are aware of that."

"I want you to know that I debated

with myself until the wee hours about whether I should send you or Sheila on this trip. I'm sure you realize that she is going to be quite disappointed that I chose you. She has met Mr. Crandell. And he is quite attractive." Mrs. Brandyse let the words sink in, but as if she hadn't made her point, she added, "*Quite* attractive."

"Oh?" Brieda tried to sound nonchalant. She had never heard Mrs. B. make any reference to the opposite sex with any kind of interest. She found herself wondering what kind of man could inspire Mrs. B.'s libido.

"Mrs. Brandyse, I do appreciate your confidence in me. It's just that, frankly, I don't know what it is I'm supposed to do. I mean, illustrations are really not my..."

"You just have to make sure that he lives up to his contract." Mrs. Brandyse's tone was suddenly back to normal—harsh bordering on savage. "He just needs someone to stand over him and crack the whip. He knows he has a deadline. He's probably already spent his advance. You know how these 'artists' are." She practically spit out the word.

"I realize creative people are often unpredictable. But cracking the whip doesn't sound like the most effective way to deal with a sensitive..."

"I didn't tell you to crack the whip." Mrs. Brandyse had a selective memory. "I simply want you to get the job done. Just get him to sit down and do the illustrations. There are only thirteen. And I happen to know for a fact that he does them quite quickly. He just has trouble disciplining himself."

"I see." Brieda was beginning to get the picture. Mrs. B. was losing patience even discussing Crandell. It was obvious, she had no desire to go to Paris and force him to do the illustrations.

"But I feel I must warn you, although I realize you are a sensible girl. He has quite

a way with the ladies."

"I thought you said he was involved." Brieda deliberately used the word Mrs. B. had chose.

"Yes. Well, there are involvements and there are... involvements."

Brieda looked confused, but she could tell Mrs. B. didn't want to discuss it further.

"I advise you to set a businesslike tone immediately. Let him know that you are a professional who has come to see that another professional does his job."

Brieda nodded thoughtfully. She noticed for the first time that her hands were clammy. She wondered if she could handle the assignment that lay ahead. Mrs. B. studied her and, as usual, seemed to read her mind.

"Do you think you can handle this?"

"Yes. Of course I can. It seems simple enough. I mean, he has signed a contract. He has to deliver the work he's been paid for."

"Yes. Well, he's been paid an advance. He won't get paid the rest until he delivers. It occurred to me that he might try to get out of the contract."

"Why would he try to do that? *Herr Hare* has been an extremely successful series..."

"Yes. But he has a very short attention span. He probably would rather be flying around Paris in a hot air balloon."

Brieda laughed, but Mrs. Brandyse's face told her this situation was no laughing matter.

"Remember Maxie Anderson, the American who died in a balloon race in Paris?"

"Yes, I read about him." Brieda said.

"I believe he is Mr. Crandell's idol. Anyway it would be a rather ugly legal situation if I had... to force him to deliver. The publicity material has already gone out with his name on it, and my author won't have anyone else do the il-

lustrations. It could cost us a hundred thousand dollars in legal fees and other expenses."

"I understand." The full scope of the problem was finally becoming apparent.

"Well, I'm sure you have things to do," Mrs. Brandyse said, standing up, indicating the meeting was over. "He'll meet you at the airport Sunday morning."

"How will we know each other?" Brieda stood up; the reality of the situation was starting to sink in.

"I told him you have red hair and that you are pretty."

Brieda blushed, and looked at her shoes. She didn't feel very pretty lately.

"How will I know him?"

"He said he'll be the most handsome man at the airport."

Brieda smiled. "So on top of being temperamental and unpredictable, he is arrogant too?"

Mrs. B. nodded, as she walked Brieda to the door. "Unfortunately, it will probably be true."

Brieda gave her a sideward glance. Could it be that Mrs. B. had a soft spot in her heart for this sensitive artist?

Brieda made a quick list of everything she could think of that she had to do to get ready. She cleared off her desk and headed for the door. Mrs. Brandyse stuck her head out of her office and called down the hall. "Goodbye, Brieda. Good luck! Call me every couple of days and let me know how it's going."

Brieda stopped dead in her tracks. How long did Mrs. B. think she was going to be gone? She considered asking this question when she heard the door slam shut—Mrs. B.'s way of ending a conversation. Brieda went home to pack her things.

Early Sunday morning Brieda woke to hear the stewardess making an announce-

ment in French. The plane would be landing soon. For a moment Brieda wasn't sure where she was. She put on her glasses, and the other passengers in the 747 airplane came into focus. In her sleep her mind had been replaying the cloak-and-dagger conversation she had had with Sheila before she left the office. There was no question about it, Sheila was very upset that Brieda had gotten the assignment.

"You think you can handle this?" Sheila had asked.

"I don't see why not. He wouldn't have signed the contract if he didn't want to fulfill it."

"He's dangerous, you know."

Brieda didn't like her intimidating tactics. "In what way?" she asked politely. Sheila was, after all, Mrs. B.'s niece. Brandyse and Conrad had been a one-family publishing house, small but venerable, for generations now.

"You'll find out soon enough," Sheila had said.

The plane was now beginning its final descent. Brieda chewed two pieces of gum, hoping her ears would open. All of her anxiety about this trip ascended just as quickly as the plane was descending.

What did Sheila mean when she said Ryan Crandell was dangerous? Was she simply trying to make her nervous? That was certainly a possibility, given the kind of competitive tone Mrs. B. was only too happy to foster. Besides, what could be so dangerous? He was "tied up," after all, and a man who would so charmingly illustrate a successful children's book series wasn't her idea of "dangerous." On the other hand, it would surprise her to find out that he was difficult. She knew enough about dealing with writers to know how hard it could be to get a creative person to produce something he or she didn't want to do.

The stewardess was making a long an-

nouncement in French, and Brieda understood most of the instructions. But the realization that she was in a foreign country increased her sense of anxiety.

The plane landed with a small thud. She could hear the click of seatbelts unlocking, even though the stewardess had just asked the passengers to keep them fastened until the plane had come to a complete stop. Brieda looked out the window. A sunny morning in Paris, 75 degrees, the pilot announced.

Exiting the plane, she walked with the other passengers through the clean lobby, and followed the crowd to the signs pointing to Customs.

The passport checking line moved more quickly than she expected, and Brieda was at the front of the line before she could get her passport and boarding card out of her carry-on bag.

"How long are you going to stay in France?" the sternfaced official asked.

"I'm not sure, exactly," Brieda answered. He gave her a hard look, and she added "A week, or two. I'm just not sure which."

"What is the purpose of your visit?" The voice was molded into permanent coldness from having asked this question a million times.

"Um, I'm trying to get an artist to . . ."

"Business or vacation?"

"Oh! Business. Definitely business."

He scrutinized her and her passport picture. Brieda felt hot prickles on the back of her neck. Finally he stamped her passport and handed it back to her.

"Next," he called to the man behind her.

Brieda moved along to the baggage claim area and waited for her bag to appear. Her fatigue gave way to trepidation about meeting Ryan Crandell. She cleared Customs quickly and walked slowly with her heavy suitcase through the crowd of waving relatives, chauffeurs, and

friends waiting for arriving passengers. To them it was Sunday morning, not the middle of the night. She searched the crowd, wondering how she would recognize Ryan. She saw only one other woman with red hair, and she had a baby in her arms. Was Ryan here? Would he recognize her? She set her suitcase down and waited for the crowd to clear out.

She searched through her purse for her lipstick and a compact mirror. She found herself trying to imagine Ryan's face as she studied her own features in the small mirror. Her full red hair was dramatic, but her hazel eyes were hidden behind scholarly glasses. At five feet five inches she had an attractive figure, but all she saw when she looked in the full-length was a woman who should lose ten pounds.

She forced her mind back to the present, and studied the Paris airport, looking for the elusive Ryan Crandell. She saw businessmen being met by chauffeurs, families being reunited. The crowd became smaller and smaller. Across the lobby Brieda saw a stewardess flirting with a young man. They seemed an unlikely pair. She looked neat as a pin in her heels and uniform; he had longish blond hair and wore jeans. Brieda's eyes searched the area. She was now the only one left standing there.

She sighed. Somehow she hadn't expected anything about this trip to be easy, so why should this part be? She picked up her suitcase and walked across the lobby toward a sign that read *Bureau de Change*, passing the giggling stewardess and the young man.

"Bridget?" the man called.

Brieda stopped and stared into the deep blue eyes of the man with the stewardess. Blond hair fell across his forehead; his jawline was strongly chiseled; his lips were sensuously full. He smiled. Brieda let go of the suitcase she was holding, and it thudded on the terazzo floor.

"Ryan?" she asked, but she knew it was he. Men were not supposed to be this beautiful. No wonder the stewardess had become enthralled. Ryan walked slowly over to Brieda. He gave her a silky look, drew her near him, and kissed her fully on the lips. Brieda was too shocked to resist. He released her just as suddenly as he had pulled her to him. He turned to the stewardess and smiled proudly.

"Tina, this is my wife, Bridget."

"Nice to meet you," the stewardess said, her self-confident smile fading. "Well, I guess I'd better be going."

Bridget was speechless. As Tina walked away sadly, Ryan waved goodbye and scooped up Brieda's suitcase.

"Welcome to Paris."

"Are you tired?" Ryan asked as they hit the cool morning air outside Orly Airport. Brieda had not said a word since he had kissed her.

"A little," she answered. Two parking attendants brought a black Lamborghini up in front of them. Everyone's eyes turned to see the quintessential car drive up.

"I'll take you to your hotel," Ryan said, tipping the attendants, who looked happy enough just to drive the expensive automobile. So much for the starving artist image, Brieda thought.

"You can take a little nap before we have lunch."

Who said I wanted to have lunch with you? she thought. But she reminded herself he was just being polite.

"Why did you do that?" she asked, as he opened the door. He put her suitcase in the back seat. She was aware that they were attracting stares from the crowd.

"Do what?"

"Why did you tell her I was your wife?" Brieda asked, getting inside the sleek car.

Ryan tossed his head back and smiled, a smile that could have sold anything to

anybody, new or used. He closed her door and went to the other side.

"It worked, didn't it?" he answered, as he got in and started the engine.

"Is that your rule of behavior in human relations?"

Ryan sighed. Obviously he didn't like this type of question. "She had just asked me to spend the night with her. By telling her you were my wife, I didn't have to hurt her feelings."

Brieda turned away to digest that. He certainly had an unpleasant arrogance.

"But why did you kiss me?"

Ryan chuckled to himself. "I felt like it."

She burned. "I really don't think that was an appropriate way to greet someone for the first time!"

Exasperated, Ryan leaned back against the seat. "This is Paris. Everyone kisses everyone here."

"Not like that!"

Ryan ignored her irritable tone. "Well, if you tell me how you like to be kissed, I'd be happy to..."

"I don't want you to kiss me!"

"No?"

"No! This is a business relationship. I would like to be taken to my hotel now."

Ryan checked over his shoulder for oncoming traffic. Brieda could see out of the corner of her eye that he was holding back a smile. They pulled out into traffic in silence.

They had been driving for a while before Ryan spoke again. "Are you always this crabby in the morning?"

The anger drained from Brieda's mood. Against her better judgment, she softened. "Just sometimes."

Ryan smiled and nodded. He was so incredibly handsome that she understood what Sheila had meant by dangerous. Simply looking at him could rob a woman of all her better judgment. Brieda gathered her thoughts, trying to maintain

control. She had known handsome men before. She would just have to ignore the feelings he obviously knew he inspired. She reminded herself that beauty can be merely skin deep.

When Brieda chanced to look over at him again, Ryan was rubbing his hand across the stubble on his face. He noticed Brieda watching him.

"I didn't shave."

"I noticed."

"But I have an excuse. I haven't been to bed yet."

"Oh." Brieda wondered why he was telling her this. She hoped he wasn't going to give her any details of his evening.

"I didn't want to oversleep this morning and leave you standing at the airport."

Brieda remembered how long she had, in fact, stood there waiting, while he and Tina the stewardess checked each other out.

"Don't you have an alarm clock?"

"Nah. I prefer to be woken up by something warm and feminine."

Brieda ignored his suggestive glance. She turned to look at the sights of Paris outside the car window.

"Do you have a boyfriend?"

"I really don't think my personal life is any of your business!"

"Why not?"

"You have a contract with Brandyse and Conrad, and you owe us thirteen illustrations. My only business with you is to see that you honor the contract."

"So that is going to be the extent of our relationship?"

"Yes."

"Good."

"Good?"

"Then you won't be asking me any questions about my personal life?"

"Of course not."

Ryan smiled, and stopped the car. Brieda was confused.

"We're here. L'Hotel Elysee."

Brieda turned and opened her door. This man was impossible. It was going to be a relief to be away from him. Ryan got her suitcase from the backseat and walked into the hotel lobby without her. She had a sudden desire not to follow him, to walk away, in any direction at all. But he had her bag, what else could she do? She sighed and walked into the hotel. It was a small lobby, but still charming, with pillars and mirrors and dark wood, and fresh flowers in large vases on the floor. Ryan was speaking perfect French to the man behind the desk. Brieda approached. He handed her the key to her room.

"Take a nap and call me when you wake up. We'll get something to eat."

He turned and walked away without waiting for her answer. A young maid straightening magazines on a table in the lobby gaped as if he were a movie star.

Inside her room she opened the door windows slightly, unpacked a few things and hung them in the large dark armoire, and fell on the rose-colored quilt atop the large bed. She studied the flowered wallpaper and the delicately muted rose tones of the room, listened to the street sounds a moment, and then fell instantly asleep.

When she opened her eyes, the clock on the wall over the vanity said one o'clock. Putting on her glasses, she searched through her papers until she found Ryan's phone number and address. Brieda dialed, and a woman finally answered. Brieda's French was just good enough to tell her she wanted to speak to Ryan.

"*Un moment.*" The woman dropped the receiver and it clanked against the wall. She could hear her shouting "*Monsieur Crandell.*"

Somehow this wasn't the type of household she would have matched with the Lamborghini he had driven. It seemed a good five minutes before Ryan's ob-

viously sleepy voice said "Allo?"

"Did I wake you?"

"Yes." His voice sounded husky. He was sexy even over the phone.

"Sorry. I thought. . . "Brieda couldn't think of an excuse.

"Are you coming over?"

"Do you know who this is?" she asked.

"Of course. All my other girlfriends would know I would still be in bed at this hour."

"Oh, I can call you back later if you. . . "

"Would you mind taking a taxi?" he asked.

"No. I'll ask the hotel to call me one."

"You have my address?"

"Yes, I do, but. . . "

"See you soon. *Bonsoir*." Ryan hung up.

Brieda stared at the receiver. "Bonsoir?" He must have thought it was still nighttime. She wondered if it was a good idea to meet him where he lived. Maybe she should call him back and arrange to meet in a cafe or the American Embassy. She dialed his phone number again, but hung up before the call went through. She couldn't go through that waiting process again. It seemed odd that he didn't have a phone. Mrs. B. had implied that he wasn't very good at handling his finances, but that car! She knew that a Lamborghini cost over \$65,000! The more she knew about Ryan, the more mysterious he became.

The taxi driver dropped her off in front of a cafe on the Left Bank and pointed across the street. Brieda paid him and got out of the cab, staring at the old five-story building. It had large door windows, with balconies, and had obviously been a nice building a hundred or more years ago. Brieda's heart was beginning to race, and she had the sudden panicky thought that she had forgotten to take the *Herr Hare*

manuscript with her. She opened her briefcase and breathed a sigh of relief to see it inside. A young waiter at the cafe smiled at her. Brieda quickly walked across the narrow street to Ryan's address.

Inside the building it took her eyes a moment to adjust to the darkened hall. She studied the mailboxes and found Ryan listed on the fourth floor. She knew that meant a five-floor walk since the French call the flight one level up the first floor. She began climbing the narrow winding stairs. On what was to her the second floor someone was cooking something wonderful, and the concierge was talking on the phone in the hall and watching her every movement. Brieda nodded to her. On the next floor a baby was crying. On the fourth floor a flautist was practicing. Brieda slowed down to catch her breath. She heard a door close above her. A woman's highheels click-clacked down the stairs. Brieda smiled as a woman with long brown hair and pretty features, wearing a soft green dress, sailed by her.

"*Bonjour*," the girl said sweetly.

"*Bonjour*," Brieda answered. The girl swept past her and continued down. Brieda continued up. Was that Ryan's wife? She had that fresh beauty of young Parisian women. Brieda didn't feel nearly as attractive, as she knocked lightly on Ryan's door on the top floor.

"Come in," the deep voice called from inside. Brieda pushed the door open, and it gave way with the creaky sound of old wood. She entered and looked around. There were large windows on three sides; the room was filled with light. And not much else. There was an easel in one corner, some rolled up canvas, a small shelf with paints, brushes, pencils, and sketch paper.

Ryan stood at the other corner, his back to her. He was wearing only his



jeans. He had obviously just stepped out of the shower. She could tell from his motions that he was zipping up his fly. Brieda could feel her cheeks flush as she turned away.

"I never lock my door," he said, turning to face her, tossing his wet hair out of his eyes. Brieda caught a glimpse of his broad chest, with just the right amount of masculine hair.

"Aren't you afraid someone might steal something?"

Ryan gestured to the bare apartment. "Like what?"

Brieda smiled and pretended to look around; she didn't want to be caught staring at his sculpted physique. But Ryan had other ideas. He came over and took the briefcase and purse she was clutching for dear life out of her hands.

"Make yourself at home."

The only place to sit was on his large bed, which was unmade, in the center of the room. She chose a window ledge. He smiled at her choice.

"I'm just going to shave."

"Would it be better if I came back later?" she said, hopping up again. He caught her hand and sat her down on the bed.

"Down and back up again? That's ten flights."

"Well, I'm missing my aerobics class in New York."

Ryan stood very close. It was disconcerting looking up at him. Water dripped from his wet hair down his bare chest, causing his abdominal muscles to contract reflexively. Brieda reached for her briefcase and drew it to her, as if somehow it could provide some kind of protection from the feelings he was inspiring. Ryan laughed.

"What's funny?" Brieda asked, feeling more self-conscious than ever.

"Nothing." Ryan shook the water out of his hair and walked toward the sink.

"Do you want some coffee?" he asked, filling the antique-looking porcelain pot. "It's about the only thing I know how to make."

"Okay. Thank you."

"You're welcome," he said in a formal voice.

"Are you teasing me?"

"No. You just seem so uncomfortable." After he set the coffee to filter, Ryan opened a cupboard above the sink and took out a jar of shaving cream. He was right, she was uncomfortable. Knowing that he saw how ill-at-ease she was certainly didn't help. Ryan smoothed some cream from his hands onto his cheeks. Brieda had the thought that he liked the idea that she was going to watch him shave, and she wasn't about to satisfy him. Looking around the room, she noticed that all the canvases that hung on the walls faced inside so that you couldn't see what was painted on them. She stood up and began to explore. When Ryan's back was turned, she lifted one canvas and peaked at the painted side. It was a portrait of a girl who looked to be about nine years old, sitting on a park bench, holding a doll listlessly drooping from one hand. The girl stared off sadly, Brieda wondered at what. She was astounded at the power and simple beauty the painting evoked. It was hard to believe that this rough man shaving in his bare room had painted this.

The sound of the water being turned off brought Brieda back to the moment. She quickly returned the painting to its position facing the wall. Ryan hadn't caught her.

He turned and wiped his now smooth jaw with a towel. Brieda looked at him. He seemed totally different. Was he? Or was it that she had just seen a private part of him more beautiful than even his handsome features would suggest?

"No more caveman," he said, smiling.

Brieda pondered the contradictions of the man who stood before her, as he poured the coffee into two mismatched mugs.

"Milk?" he asked.

"Please."

"Don't say 'please'."

"Why not?"

"Because it sounds too sexy on your lips."

"You asked," Brieda said, hoping her cheeks didn't betray her flush.

"I don't know why I did. I don't have any milk."

Brieda smiled. He was certainly full of surprises.

He reached for an old sweatshirt on a hook near the sink, and pulled it over his head. "I'll be right back."

"That's okay. I'll drink it black." Brieda was thinking of the ten flights of stairs. No sooner was he out the door, then he popped his head back in. "Don't go away."

"I won't." She listened as he bounded barefoot down the stairs, two at a time. She realized she was smiling. She took the manuscript out of her briefcase. Holding it helped her to refocus on the purpose of her visit. She stared at the words on the page and saw nothing. She heard footsteps running back up the stairs and voices.

In the next moment Ryan burst through the creaky door, breathing hard from the dash and carrying a dainty porcelain carafe. He poured the milk into her mug with the grace of a fine *maitre d'*.

"*Cafe au lait, mademoiselle.*"

"*Merci,*" Brieda said.

He took a long sip from his cup and sighed. He gave Brieda a devilish look and stretched out on the bed beside her. This sudden move sent her to her feet. Ryan laughed again.

"We're going to have to do something about you."

"I'm not used to having business meetings on unmade beds!"

Ryan instantly began straightening the pillows and pulling up the sheet. "Would it help if I made the..."

"Stop teasing me!"

"What am I doing?"

"Ever since I've been here you've made fun of me, laughed at me, and tried to embarrass me."

"When did I laugh at you?"

"I told you I was missing my aerobics class and you..."

Ryan was laughing again.

"What's so funny about aerobics class? Everyone in New York takes them."

"Oh, it's not funny..."

"Then why can't you stop laughing?"

"I don't know, I just can't imagine you in one of those teenie weenie little outfits bouncing around and sweating to loud rock and roll."

"My teacher plays soft rock."

"Soft rock! What's that?"

"It's... mellow rock and roll."

Ryan lost it again, laughing uncontrollably. "No wonder I left America. If all they have to say for themselves culturally is soft rock, I might as well stay here forever!"

"That's a ridiculous statement. There are plenty of important cultural things going on in all the arts."

"Like what?"

"In fine art, writing, music, dance, movies..." Brieda knew she was right, but as her mind searched for examples she drew a blank.

"Name names," Ryan said. His tone was hard. He got up from the bed and paced over to the window. Brieda was about to list some important names, but as she watched him pacing she realized he didn't really want an answer. He was lost in his private thoughts. He didn't even seem to notice the silence that hung between them. Brieda wondered what had happened to change the mood, to make him

so pensive.

"Shall we start some work?" Brieda suggested.

"What?" He seemed to be jarred back from a distant world.

"Shall we go over the manuscript?"

The light behind him put his face in silhouette. She couldn't read his expression as he studied her question for a long time before speaking.

"Okay." His voice was quiet, even sad, as he sat on the windowsill, one foot on the balcony. He stared out at the rooftops. "Read it to me."

Brieda had a sudden impulse to go over and comfort him. But she didn't even know from what source his pain had come. She forced her hands to go through the motions of lifting up the manuscript. As she began to read the charming story, the words left her lips and lost their meaning. If only she could do something. She tried to focus on the story, to read with the feeling the story deserved. He continued to stare out the window. Was he listening?

"Ryan?"

"Hmmm?" He was startled.

"Is something bothering you?" Brieda asked.

He got up quickly, his devilishly playful smile returning.

"Let's go outside! Let's take a ride in the country."

Brieda was not so much surprised by his idea as by his sudden change of mood.

"You can take that with you," he said, taking the manuscript out of her hands and stuffing it irreverently back into her briefcase. Saying no was obviously out of the question. Ryan was already putting on his cowboy boots. He stood up, gathering a leather jacket from a hook on the wall. She hadn't said yes. But he caught her eye. There was no sign of refusal.

"Here." He handed her one of the motorcycle helmets that sat on the floor.

"What do I need that for?"

"We have to take the bike. I had to give the car back." Ryan noticed her bare arms and took another leather jacket off a hook. It was obviously for a woman.

Ryan was impatient to go. "Come on." He grabbed the briefcase.

Brieda followed him out the door. She pulled it closed. He was already down a flight of stairs.

"Don't you want to lock it?"

"Lock's broken."

"Why don't you fix it?" Brieda asked, trying to keep up with him.

"What for?"

"Doesn't it make you feel unsafe?"

Ryan was already on the pavement and getting the motorcycle ready when she came out. He strapped the briefcase to the carrier on the back.

"I never feel unsafe."

"Never?"

"Nah. If anyone every bothered me, I'd kill 'em."

Brieda wondered if that were true; somehow she didn't doubt it. At that moment he reminded her of her older brother Chris, who had been killed in the Viet Nam war. Joking around, Chris might have said something like that. It gave her a chill to think about it.

As if reading her thoughts, Ryan handed her the jacket.

"You might get cold on the road."

"Were you ever in the army?"

"Marines. Third Division."

Brieda nodded. She recognized his live-for-today attitude. It frightened her and fascinated her at the same time. The pieces of Ryan's personality were beginning to assemble, even if they didn't quite make sense yet. Ryan was fastening his helmet. He turned on the ignition and listened to the motor before he swung a leg over the bike. Brieda fastened her helmet, aware that his every move enchanted her.

"Ready?" he asked.

She carefully swung a leg over, gathering up her full cotton skirt. He noticed her sleek calf. Brieda wished she had worn pants. He waited for her to get settled.

"Put your hands around my waist."

Brieda loosely circled her hands around him. When she had, he stepped on the gas, and pulled out into traffic. Her hands tightened around him and the sudden forward momentum pressed her body up against him. Fear gave way to a thrill as she started to relax slightly. Holding him tightly, she felt safe and unsafe at the same time.

Ryan maneuvered deftly through wild city traffic, and it wasn't long before they were on a country road.

They had been driving for over an hour when Ryan pulled into a roadside cafe. There were many motorcycles and a few bicycles parked outside. Ryan told her to get off first, and he maneuvered the big bike to a spot where he could leave it.

When he returned to her, he asked, "Did you like the ride?"

"Yes, I did!" she answered.

Ryan undid his helmet. He smiled at her, and she remembered she was still wearing hers, even though they had been standing on safe ground for some time. She struggled to unfasten it. He came to her aid. She couldn't help but look into those intense blue eyes. He didn't seem to notice.

"You never rode a motorcycle before?"

"No. How could you tell?"

"It's obvious. Come on, let's get some supplies."

They entered the small cafe. The owner seemed happy to see Ryan. He and a few men at the bar got into a discussion about an upcoming motorcycle race to be held in the area. While the owner gathered up a bottle of red wine, a loaf of bread, some apples, and a hunk of white cheese, Brieda sat down at a nearby table to wait.

This was obviously men's talk.

Brieda looked around the quaint cafe. Her eye stopped at a picture hanging on the wall behind the counter. It showed two men preparing a hot air balloon for lift-off. Even from a distance, Brieda knew it was Ryan in the picture. She wondered who the other man was.

Ryan tried to pay for the supplies, but the owner waved away his money.

He walked over to Brieda, who was still studying the picture. "That's me and my best friend Lucien before the Paris Bicentennial race," he offered.

Brieda could tell by the way Ryan said his name that Lucien was very important to him. "How come they keep that picture hanging up there?" Brieda asked as they left the cafe.

"That man I was talking to is Lucien's old man."

Ryan strapped the supplies onto the back of the motorcycle. Brieda wanted to know more about Lucien, but Ryan interrupted her train of thought when he tossed her the sleek black helmet.

"You catch just like a girl." Ryan said with a smile.

"How could you tell I haven't ridden a motorcycle before?"

"Lots of things tell me. The way you lean against the curves. The way you hold me."

Brieda felt exposed. She studied the ground.

"Silly." Ryan saw her embarrassment. "I like the way you hold me." He leaned across the motorcycle between them and kissed her softly on the lips. Brieda froze. She hadn't expected his lips to be so gentle.

"Come." He swung a cowboy boot over the seat and settled in. He turned and looked at her, waiting for her to do the same. Brieda raised herself onto the seat. It was more awkward now that the package was tied onto the back of the

bike. She shyly put her hands in a loose arc around his waist. He turned his head around to face her.

"What's the matter?"

"If you hold me like that, you're going to fall off."

Brieda tightened her grip around his waist. He started the motor. "When I take the corner, don't lean away from it. Lean into the curve, okay?"

"Okay," Brieda said.

He reached back and patted with a gloved hand on her thigh for reassurance.

Ryan accelerated quickly and they headed down isolated country roads in the afternoon sun. She thought about what he had said. It seemed he was taking the curves even harder now. She leaned with him and the bike as they hugged the winding road. Brieda's body melded into his. Like lovers they moved in symmetry. After about eighty kilometers, Ryan pulled off the road.

"That was much better," he said, helping her off, squeezing her hand.

He walked the bike onto the grass about twenty feet and left it parked under a tree. He then untied the bag of food and briefcase, and strapped both helmets to the bike.

"That was fun," Brieda said.

"Much better than a car," Ryan replied. "You learn much more about a person riding on a motorcycle with them than you do riding in a car."

"Yes," Brieda agreed. It certainly had been more intimate. She wondered what he had learned about her.

"Where did you get that fancy car you had at the airport?"

"I just borrowed it to pick you up. I didn't think we knew each other well enough to ride on my bike."

"You're right."

They walked through the trees. Brieda wondered how well they knew each other now. She could hear the sound of a river

running softly in the distance.

"So, who do you know that would lend you their \$65,000 car?"

"My wife."

The words landed like concrete. Brieda tried to hide the intensity of her reaction. So he was married. How could she have allowed herself *not* to know such an important fact? She felt suddenly angry for the kiss he had given her outside the cafe. What kind of game was he playing? The idyllic surroundings suddenly seemed ludicrous. Ryan sensed her stiffness beside him.

"We don't live together," he said.

"Well, la-de-da!" Brieda said sarcastically.

Ryan laughed. "I haven't heard anyone say that since *Annie Hall*!"

Brieda was not amused. She was angry at him for bringing her out here, and angrier at herself for going along with the idea.

"Don't get all huffy. My wife and I are..." he searched for the words "...are history."

"But you're still married?"

"Legally. But that doesn't make it love."

Brieda stopped dead in her tracks. "Well, what does that make me, riding around on a motorcycle, being out here in the woods with you?"

Ryan stared at her as if she had lost her mind.

"What are you talking about?"

"Why did you bring me out here? Why did you kiss me? What do you think is going to happen!" Brieda realized she was practically yelling, when Ryan answered quietly.

"What do *you* think is going to happen?"

The wind went out of her sails. She felt humiliated. She turned and walked away from him.

"Where are you going?"

"I'm leaving." Brieda continued walking. She knew how stupid that was—she couldn't exactly take the motorcycle. But it didn't seem any wiser to stay. Maybe she could hitch a ride back to the city.

She marched back to the road and sat down to wait for a passing car. God, I feel like an idiot, she thought. What was worse—sitting in the hot afternoon sun, or going back and facing him after she had acted like a silly school girl? She thought she heard a car and stood up and walked to the center of the road to wait. Nothing came. At last she finally convinced herself she was acting ridiculous. After all, she could spend an afternoon with a married man, on a business mission and not get into "trouble."

She took a deep breath and swallowed her pride, and walked back into the woods to find Ryan. She found him about a hundred yards from where she had left him. He was lying on a hill looking down at the river. She approached quietly, but she knew he was aware of her presence.

"I was going to hitch a ride but there weren't any cars."

"I know," Ryan said.

Brieda sat down a few feet away from him. Maybe it was the jetlag catching up with her. She felt exhausted.

"Want some wine?" He held up the bottle of burgundy he had bought.

"Sure." Brieda was relieved that he didn't say anything about her outburst, as she took the bottle and swallowed deeply. It seemed like the best wine she had ever tasted. Reaching over, she passed the bottle back to him. He took a long swallow.

"If you were any further away, we'd have to communicate by mail." He held the bottle towards her, forcing her to move closer to him to reach it. But when she came forward to retrieve it, he withdrew the bottle, holding it close to his chest.

"Alright, you win," Brieda said, moving closer.

"Not necessarily," Ryan said. "The game has just begun."

Brieda sighed loudly. She wished he would tell her what game they were playing, or at least what the rules were.

"Are we going to work now?" Brieda asked, pulling the pages out of her briefcase. He snatched them away, and stuffed them back inside.

"Anyone ever tell you you have a one-track mind?"

"Anyone ever tell you you were impossible?"

"Everyone. But usually after they know me a little better."

"That doesn't sound like something you should be proud of."

He handed her the wine. "What is it about me that drives *you* crazy?"

Brieda looked at him and laughed. How could she answer this?

"Tell me."

"I can't."

"Why? You tell me everything you don't like about me, and I'll tell you everything I don't like about you."

Brieda did a doubletake. It hadn't occurred to her that he might have a list of unspoken complaints about her. She had been so busy sorting out her conflicting responses to him. Curiosity about his list made her almost willing to reveal her own. He smiled playfully and gestured for her to speak.

"Well, for one thing..." He had the most beautiful blue eyes. "Oh, I can't just tell you what I don't like about you! It seems rude."

"It'll clear the air. For everything you tell me that you don't like about me, I'll tell you something I don't like about you."

Brieda laughed. He made it sound so simple, but she just couldn't make the words leave her lips.

"But what if we do it, and then we're uncomfortable or embarrassed afterwards?"

"Do you feel uncomfortable and embarrassed now?" he asked.

Brieda nodded. The wine was beginning to soften her defenses.

"Good. Then you have nothing to lose. You're already a mess."

"I am not a mess! You just love making me nervous! I'm not used to being around someone who has the manners of a . . . gorilla!"

Ryan laughed. "Terrific! Wasn't that easy? Okay, it's my turn." He gave her a good hard look.

"I don't like the way you always think I have something up my sleeve."

Brieda nodded, considering this. It was true, she was always suspicious of his motives. "But don't you?"

"It's not premeditated. Between two people there's always more than one thing going on, anyway."

"What do you mean?"

"Well, there's what's being said and done. And then there's what's being thought or felt."

Brieda thought about what he said as she took a swallow of the wine he handed her. Then he broke off a large chunk of the bread for her. With his pocket knife he cut open an apple and sliced the cheese.

"Your turn," he said, offering her a bite size piece of each.

"I can't stand the fact that you're so . . ." She chickened out.

"So what?"

"Beautiful."

Ryan took the bottle out of her hands and leaned over and kissed her long and slowly.

"What do you think *you* are?" he asked, his voice soft as the wind.

She shook her head. "I don't know. Not beautiful."

He took her in his arms and lay her

back down on the grass. "Silly."

"I'm not silly."

"Yes, you are. You don't know anything."

His lips explored hers more intently. The birds, trees, the river sounds, faded. She was aware only of his powerful presence pressing against her. With his hands he gently explored her face and her hair as if he had never touched a woman before.

"I'm memorizing with my hands," he said, closing his eyes. Brieda surrendered to his explorations. Who would have expected he could be so gentle? "You passed the test."

"What test?" she whispered.

"You're beautiful with my eyes open and with them closed. If I can still feel it with my eyes closed, that's real beauty."

"Your turn," Brieda said, inching away, no longer able to look into his eyes.

He released her and sighed, leaning back on the grass.

"I don't like the way you make me make all the moves, and then when I do, you act like I'm out of line."

Brieda sat up, her mind racing with a thousand defenses. She was just about to give him a piece of her fiery Irish mind when suddenly her arguments slipped through a hole. What he said was true. What was he, some kind of psychiatrist? But who was he to give *her* a hard time? Was he married or wasn't he? He said he didn't live with her, but what did that mean?

There was silence between them for a long time. She wondered what he was thinking as he sat up and cut another piece of apple. He handed it to her. She shook her head "no."

"Did that upset you?" he asked.

"Ryan, who was that woman in the green dress?"

He looked completely blank. "What woman?"



"The woman who was coming down the stairs from your apartment when I was coming up. Was that your wife?"

"Oh, that was Sara," Ryan said nonchalantly. "I did some substitute teaching at an art school. She was one of my students."

Brieda wondered just what it was he was teaching her.

"I still don't understand about your marriage."

Ryan chewed the apple slowly and threw the core way down the hill before answering. "Like I said, I'm still married. But my wife and I don't live together. I see other women, she sees other men."

"Does she still love you?"

Ryan snapped his knife shut and reached for his leather jacket. He was clearly annoyed.

"I thought we agreed in the car that we had a business relationship and wouldn't be cross-examining each other's personal lives!"

"That's true. But so far what we've been conducting isn't exactly business."

"Well, maybe we should go back to a 'business relationship'".

Ryan made it sound wholly unpleasant. He handed Brieda her glasses, gathered up the food and wine and briefcase, and stood up.

Brieda put her glasses on. "Well, that's fine with me," she lied. She got up and followed a few steps behind him back to the bike. Her memory flashed on a day at the beach when she was seven. She had spent all afternoon making a sandcastle. She really wanted to show it to her parents, and just as they came over to see it, a huge wave washed up on the shore. Everything she had so carefully built was washed away.

When Ryan dropped her off in front of L'Hotel Elysee it was painfully obvious they had barely said a word the entire trip.

She got off the motorcycle and unfastened her helmet. She hardly looked at him as she handed it back to him.

"Why don't you give me the manuscript. I can't put my hands on my copy just at the moment. I'll read it over tonight and try to plan out the illustration," Ryan said.

Brieda nodded her agreement. She pulled the papers out of her briefcase and handed them to him. Folding them, he stuck them in the inside pocket of his leather jacket, crumpling them as they went. Brieda flashed on Edith Brecher, the author—what her reaction would be if she could see his irreverence.

"I'll walk you to the door," he said, dismounting.

"That's all right."

He was already beside her.

"I'll try to work on them tomorrow. Why don't you do some sightseeing, and I'll call you around dinnertime tomorrow."

"Right," Brieda said, the chill in her voice scarcely concealed.

The next day Brieda took the advice of her hotel concierge and took a special tour bus to see some of the sights. After all, it wasn't every day that you had time to kill in Paris. She enjoyed the guided tour, but she felt distracted. What would Mrs. B. say if she knew that so far all she could report is that she had gone on a picnic in the country with Ryan and had no illustrations to show for it. She began to worry about whether or not she was going to go back home with the illustrations under her arm. She would sooner encounter an enemy army than face Mrs. B. with no artwork in hand.

Well, she thought, at least he's working today. Maybe I just need to leave him alone. Artists are sensitive people; perhaps he needs to do things in his own way, and in his own time.

Her heart sank later, when she returned to her hotel and there were no messages. Inside her room, she kicked off her heels and sat down in the mauve tufted and tasseled chair in front of the window.

"I'm in trouble," she said out loud.

The telltale signs were all there, one after the other. She had spent the day thinking of nothing but him. She had expected a call from him, and when there wasn't one, she'd felt an inexplicable ache. The memory of his kiss had left a permanent imprint on her lips.

Outside her window she could see the preliminary activity of what would soon be Paris nightlife. It occurred to her, not for the first time, that maybe she was the wrong person for the job. She looked at her watch. It was six-thirty. Time was creeping. It was lunchtime in New York. Maybe she should call Mrs. B. and tell her... what? "I think maybe you picked the wrong person for this job... and on top of that, I have a terrible feeling that I'm falling in love with Ryan. I'm not sure. But what I am sure about is that I don't have a single one of the thirteen illustrations."

All Brieda had to do was imagine this conversation, to convince herself that she wasn't about to call New York.

She picked up the round-shaped telephone and called Ryan. While his concierge called up to him, loud and long, Brieda tried to look at the bright side. Maybe he'd been working and hadn't taken a break all day. Lots of artists work that way. She imagined for a moment that he had finished the illustrations. Maybe she could get on a plane and go back to New York. Putting three thousand miles between herself and Ryan sounded like a very sensible idea. Just as these thoughts were beginning to calm the wild waters of her mind, a sleepy voice came into the phone.

"Allo."

"Ryan, it's Brieda. Are you sleeping?"  
"Yeah. I was up all night. What time is it?"

Brieda translated the numbers on her watch into European time. "It's almost 1900. When did you go to bed?"

"About an hour ago."

"Oh." Had he been up all night working on the illustrations? Or had something or someone else stolen his attention? She could hear Ryan yawn. She imagined him leaning against the wall by the stairway, in his bare feet, probably wearing only his jeans. She phrased her question carefully.

"How is the work going?"

"I had a problem."

"What's the matter? Is it something about the revision in the text that I can explain to you?"

"No, no. I had a personal problem."

"Oh, I see."

Brieda didn't need ESP to guess that the problem was feminine. Finally she asked, "Did you get any work done?"

There was a painfully long pause. When he spoke at last, the tone of his voice was clearly strained.

"Look, Brieda, I had a little crisis I had to deal with. Why don't I call you in the morning?"

"Don't bother. Just call me when you have some work done!" Without waiting for an answer, she hung up the phone. She was shaking, but she knew she had done the right thing.

Brieda had been up since seven-thirty, a result of being tucked in at the unnaturally early hour of ten o'clock. She had already showered, and although she was still in her pajamas, she was poring over guide books she had bought the night before. She was planning an itinerary for her day.

There was a knock on the door and a somewhat shrilly pitched voice sang out "*Bonjour, mademoiselle, room service.*"

Brieda snatched up her robe and called back "*Un moment, s'il vous plait.*" She modestly tied her robe closed before unlocking the door. When she opened it, no one was there. She was about to close the door again when her foot touched a tray on the floor. It wasn't the usual breakfast arrangement. Along with a basket of croissants and a pot of coffee, there were two vases, one with a single yellow rose, the other with some rolled up papers sticking up out of the top. Brieda looked around; there was no one in sight. She bent down and inhaled the potent fragrance of the flower. There was no note attached. She pulled out the papers and unrolled them.

There they were. Three illustrations. Herr Hare in a dinner jacket, grooming his mustache. Herr Hare polishing his *pince-nez* glasses. Herr Hare writing out his tea party invitations. They were wonderful. Crouching on the floor, Brieda laughed out loud at their brilliance. Shaking her head, she mused. How could such a rogue make such charming creatures come so vividly to life?

Just as she was about to gather up the precious tray and close her door, she noticed the shiny silver tips of Ryan's cowboy boots. He was standing behind the large potted plant by the elevator.

"Okay, you!" Brieda said, "so where are the other ten?"

Ryan laughed, that low throaty sound. It made something inside Brieda vibrate. He peeked his head out from behind the plant. She modestly used the door to protect her pajama-clad self from his sight.

"I'm only going to give them to you if you promise to be nice," Ryan said — words Brieda herself might have spoken.

"It takes two to be nice," she returned.

"Fine, then I'll start." He came to her and swooped her up in his arms and carried her across the threshold. He lowered her gently to the bed, and was just about

to lie down beside her, when she quickly moved away from him. Ryan didn't seem to mind. He reached over for the telephone and called room service. In his perfect French he ordered breakfast for two. Brieda watched him with crossed arms. As provocative as he was, it was difficult to be angry with him.

She decided to ignore the romantic aura that was already beginning to surround them. She went briskly to the hall and gathered up his tray and brought it in. She picked up the illustrations and flattened them out on the dresser.

"I can't believe that you would just roll them up like this."

"It's just paper."

"Not any more it isn't," Brieda said, smiling, admiring the work.

"You're a romantic," Ryan mused.

"What are you?"

"I don't know. Come over here."

Brieda felt her cheeks flush. She nervously straightened up the cosmetic bottles on top of the vanity. "Why?"

"Because I want you."

His words touched every nerve cell in Brieda's body. She froze like a frightened deer. It didn't help that his beautiful blue eyes were riveted on her. She wished more than anything that she hadn't been caught in her pajamas. It definitely put her at a disadvantage.

"You shouldn't have your cowboy boots on the bed."

These words sounded twice as inane to Brieda as they must have sounded to him. Ryan, however, said nothing in reply. He took off his boots, lay back down on the bed and motioned for her to come to him.

Brieda hesitated. She fussed nervously with the sash on her robe. She was paralyzed by the conflicting desire to go to him, his waiting arms, and a distant voice that told her to stay right where she was.

"Come to me." His voice was silky and seductive, his whole body was an invita-

tion to a dream.

The next steps were the slowest she had ever taken. Her eyes locked into his. She used their blue radiance as sailors had once navigated by only the stars in the sky. She was close enough to sense the subtle presence of his cologne. A smile started in his eyes and spread to his full lips. He lay back down on the big bed and gazed up at her. It seemed it was enough just to look.

"Bridget," he whispered, and reached out a hand to her. His strong hand squeezed hers gently, and then she could feel a slight pull. Ever so slowly, he was pulling her towards him. Or was he? Was it the sensation of surrender that was bringing her body in slow motion closer and closer to his? Their lips touched, and the rose-colored wallpaper disappeared. The room was aflame. *His* hunger she had sensed before. What surprised her was her own. Ryan practically ripped off her robe.

"I hate clothes," he whispered. The breathiness in his voice made Brieda demand his lips again. Without his lips leaving hers, he managed to free her from her pajamas. In an instant only tasted in dreams, Brieda's shyness was gone. It was replaced with the burning desire to feel his naked chest against hers. She pressed against him as he pulled his sweater over his head, then struggled out of his jeans. Electric sensations ricocheted through her body as his naked body touched hers. His hands explored every part of her. His lips, then his tongue, gently followed. Gentleness followed passion, in alternation, like ocean waves. Brieda floated off with him, off to a private and majestic sea.

As Brieda dried off from her second shower of the morning, she couldn't help but gaze at Ryan's sleeping form. He lay on his back atop the sheets. The blankets were strewn about on the floor. He look-

ed totally peaceful, lying there naked as the day he was born.

"I think I love you," she whispered, knowing he couldn't hear her in his sleep. But her heart stopped as he moved sleepily on the bed. Had he heard her? She listened for the quiet, steady sound of his breathing. He was still safely shrouded in the world of dreams. Looking at him, it was extremely tempting to crawl back into his strong arms. Struggling with this temptation, she touched the hand that lay outstretched off the edge of the bed. He returned her touch and squeezing her hand, pulled her over on top of him.

Brieda giggled. "Are you awake?"

Ryan gave her a naughty look. "I am now."

Brieda could feel his desire reawakening. It shot waves of responsiveness through her own veins.

"Where did you go?" he asked, his hands roaming underneath her robe. Her skin was still moist from her shower.

"I took a shower and ordered us another pot of coffee," Brieda said, her eyes closing, as her body opened to the sensations he was evoking.

"How could you leave me like that?"

Brieda was becoming addicted to the husky sound of his voice when he was aroused.

"I don't know."

"Promise never to leave me again?"

"I promise," Brieda whispered without hesitation.

Ryan opened his eyes. She thought she sensed a flash of fear in them. He seemed suddenly restless.

"You asked me," she said.

"I know. I'm sorry. You don't have to promise me anything."

"I know I don't *have* to. But I did."

Ryan looked at her, got out of bed, and walked to the breakfast tray. "My life is complicated enough without promises."

He poured them both some delicious-

smelling, steaming coffee, remembering that Brieda liked milk in hers. Brieda considered the truth of what he had just said, wondering if she could fit into his "life of complications."

"What's the matter?"

Brieda shrugged and sipped her coffee. She was afraid that if she brought up anything "heavy" they would fight again. She didn't want to rock the boat. If it meant finding out that happiness between them was only a fantasy, she would rather not face it just now.

"You're thinking about my wife."

"Your wife, your life, your moods, your dreams."

"I only have one dream."

Brieda watched him spread marmalade on his croissant, and waited for him, to go on.

"I want to cross the Atlantic in a helium balloon," he said.

"Why?"

"Because Maxie Anderson did it."

"That means that you have to do it too?"

Ryan nodded gravely. "Maxie crossed the Atlantic in a balloon and survived. Then in a minor race from Paris he was killed in West Germany."

"Oh." Brieda was trying to understand why all of this was so important to Ryan.

"Lucien and I were in a balloon about seventeen miles behind him."

Brieda observed the dreamer sitting before her. Those radiant eyes were the eyes of a wanderer; she doubted that he could spend his life with any one woman.

Ryan interrupted her brooding. "Do you want to hear about my wife?"

"If you want to tell."

"After I got out of the Marines, I wanted to get as far away as I could from everything. I wasn't ready to settle down and take things seriously. I had just been through four years of the most serious..." His mind drifted to

memories that were obviously very painful. Brieda tried to imagine him as a soldier. She was cut short.

"So I came to Paris. If you want to paint, this is the city, right?"

"Definitely."

"I was having immigration problems and I wanted to stay here. I was doing portraits on the street to make a few bucks. Maryse sat down to have me paint her, and the rest is history."

"Was it love at first sight?"

Ryan thought about it. "For her it was. She used to come around a lot after that. She sent all her girlfriends to be painted." Ryan laughed, remembering. "It was funny, all these rich women sitting on a milk carton having their portrait painted in the street by an unknown ex-Marine."

Brieda laughed with him, imagining the scene.

"I guess she was worried about me financially. Finally after about a month of this, I took her out for a coffee. I thanked her and told her to stop sending her girlfriends. I was tired of painting them. She tried to deny that she had done this, but I knew."

"So when did you start going out?"

"I didn't have any money to take her out, and I wouldn't let her pay, so we would take walks, and talk, or go on picnics."

Brieda cringed, remembering their picnic together—how he had kissed her, how it had ended.

"She was very rich and she would invite me out on her father's yacht."

"Did you go?"

"Once. I had no interest in her money or her friends, or her lifestyle. She had lots of rich boyfriends, but she wanted me. Probably because I didn't want her." Ryan shook his head and laughed.

"Did you love her?" Brieda hoped the intensity she felt didn't show under her words.

"Sort of, but more as a friend."

"Then why did you marry her?"

"Like I said, I was having immigration problems, and I wanted to stay in France. By then I had found a teacher that I really wanted to continue studying with. And then Maryse became pregnant."

"Your baby?"

"No. Some guy who just walked out on her when he found out she was pregnant."

"That's terrible."

"Yeah, but she wanted to have the baby. So she made me an offer."

"Marriage?"

"Yep. The deal was, we'd get married for three years. She could afford to have a baby on her own, but she wanted someone to be there."

Brieda nodded. It wasn't hard to understand.

"Did you live together?"

"Maryse wanted me to move in, so I did. After about two years I got that studio, so I could work."

"How long did you live together?"

"Almost five years."

"Wow. Wasn't that above and beyond the agreement?"

"Those were my exact words to her."

"What about the child?"

Ryan stretched restlessly. The white curtains billowing softly next to the open window caught his eye.

"She lost it in the third month. She fell down the stairs on the boat one day. The doc said that was probably what did it."

"Boy," was all Brieda could say.

"It was probably for the best."

"Did you ever have any kids together?"

Ryan shook his blond head dramatically. "I'm not that dumb."

"What was it like being married to a rich woman?"

"I lived in her house, but I never took any money from her. I would sell a paint-

ing every once in a while. I could live for a year on two sales."

Brieda nodded. She tried to imagine what their lives had been like together. She wondered if he still cared about her.

"Enough about me. Come sit on my lap."

Brieda complied, but she was still thoughtful.

"So what did you do last night without me?" he asked, giving her a squeeze.

"Nothing really."

"This is Paris. Nobody does nothing."

"I do. I went for a walk on the Champs Elysees, and I went to see a movie."

"That's all you did?"

"Yes."

"Didn't you go out to dinner?"

"I was going to, but I chickened out. I went to that place that looks like McDonald's. American fast food, French style."

"Oh! That place. You didn't! Why didn't you go to a nice truly French restaurant? There's only about two-thousand of them right here."

"I was too shy to go eat alone at night," Brieda admitted.

Ryan turned her around to face him. "Are you serious?"

Brieda tried to get up. He wouldn't let her go. She nodded yes. Ryan held her tight.

"I won't leave you alone at night any more," he said.

Tears welled up in her eyes, but she held them back.

That day Brieda went through the motions of being a tourist. She visited the Cathedral of Notre Dame, the Louvre Museum, the new Picasso Museum, the Pompidou Center, and counted the minutes until six-thirty, when she was supposed to meet Ryan at his loft. At five twenty-five she sat down at the sidewalk cafe across the street from his building.

She had just enough good sense left not to show up at his apartment an hour early. The waiter brought her *citron presse*, the lemon drink that is to Parisians what Coke is to Americans. She took from her purse the postcards she had bought and began to record the sights she had seen. When she had finished the last card, she looked up. All the waiters were staring at something across the street.

"*Pierre, regardez!*" one said, pointing.

She noticed a small crowd standing across the street. As they separated and continued down the street, she saw what it was that had caught their attention. The black Lamborghini was parked a few spaces down from Ryan's door. Had it always been there and she hadn't noticed, or had it just arrived? Brieda indulged the fleeting thought that maybe it wasn't Maryse's. But what she saw next wiped away any such folly. A beautifully elegant woman with blond hair tied neatly in a bun came of Ryan's building. It had to be Maryse. Ryan, barefoot, was right behind her. Even from this distance Brieda knew she was beautiful. Ryan kissed her on both cheeks, the French way of saying hello and goodbye, then he hugged her. Not a quick hug of old friends, but a long, feelingful hug of parting lovers. Maryse walked to her car with the confident elegance only French women have. Like a queen she accepted the admiring glances as she slipped into her sleek car and sped away.

Brieda looked again for Ryan. He was gone. She didn't see whether he had gone back upstairs or not. She felt the blood in her veins turn to ice.

When the waiter presented her check, Brieda slipped some francs on the tray, and forgetting her postcards, headed for the ladies' room. It cost one franc to go inside. Brieda paid it. She didn't want to cry in public. Some tears can't be reasoned with. She just had to ride the storm. After

about twenty minutes there was a knock on the door.

"*Un moment,*" Brieda said, drying her cheeks. She flushed the toilet which she had not used, and opened the door. The waiting girl smiled at her politely. Brieda went to the sink to wash her face and comb her hair and try to figure out what to do. She had no desire to go upstairs to see Ryan. She looked at her watch. It was six o'clock. She considered just going back to her hotel, but she knew she should at least call.

She went upstairs and dialed Ryan's number. The concierge's teenage son answered, and went to call Ryan. When Ryan finally came to the phone and said "*Allo,*" she lost her nerve.

"*Allo?*" he repeated.

"It's me, Bridget."

"Where are you. Are you all right?"

She bit her lip, trying to steady herself.

"What's the matter? Where are you? Hello?"

"Hello."

There was a great clanging as Pierre dropped a tray of dishes a few feet from her.

"*Pierre! Salaud! Stupide!*"

The shouting in French continued in the background and Brieda could barely hear Ryan's voice over the clamor.

"Brieda! Are you coming over?"

"No."

"Why not?"

"I don't know."

"What happened?"

"I think I'm just going to go back to my hotel. I'm tired," Brieda lied.

"Can you hold on one minute?" Ryan asked.

"Why?"

"Just hold one minute." Brieda heard the phone receiver drop and clank against the wall as she had the first time she called. She was relieved. It gave her a moment to gather her thoughts. She could feel more



tears standing ready. She squeezed her eyes closed to prevent them. Maybe she should just hang up. What more could she say to him now? It seemed he had been gone an eternity.

"Ryan!" she called into the phone. There was no answer. She called louder. "*Ryan!*"

"Yes." His voice was right behind her. She opened her eyes and whirled around, and he put his arms around her. She struggled, but he held her tighter.

"What's the matter?"

Brieda couldn't say.

"How long have you been in here?"

"About an hour."

"Aha!"

"Aha, what?"

"You're upset because you saw Maryse, right?"

"Right."

"Would it help if I explained why I was seeing her?"

"Probably not. But go ahead."

"We were discussing terms for our divorce."

Brieda looked up into his eyes to see if they were telling the truth.

"Have you been crying?"

Brieda looked away.

"Let's go upstairs," he said softly.

"Could we just walk a little?"

"Sure." He led Brieda outside and they went for a walk along the Seine. He lifted her up on the stone wall, and they sat together, dangling their feet, and watching occasional boats go by.

"Do you swear that's what you were doing?"

"Yes, I swear. We agreed to an uncontested divorce. I'm going to give her my paintings, and she's going to give me my freedom."

Brieda sighed, believing him instantly.

"I'm sorry for making a scene."

"It's all right. I've seen much worse."

Ryan lay back along the wall. He was

obviously bored with the water. Instead he stared into the sky.

"Do you really want to cross the Atlantic in a balloon?"

Ryan smiled. "Yes, I really do. With Lucien."

Brieda was learning that Ryan, in his own way, was very serious about everything. He took the postcards out of his pocket that she had left behind in the cafe. Brieda smiled. He looked at them, reading what she had written, and studied the tourist views on the front, then handed them back to her.

"I think I'm getting tired of Paris," he said.

"Why?"

"Just am. Want to go back to my place?" Ryan gave her one of his silky looks. He slipped a hand under the bottom edge of her skirt.

She hesitated.

"You have to come over if you want to see the new illustration I did."

"Oh, yeah. Right." Brieda laughed. It was absolutely amazing to her how quickly he could make her completely forget about business.

Ryan gently pushed open the unlocked door of his apartment, and they entered. Brieda felt a sense of relief seeing that the bed in the middle of the room was made. For the first time, the paintings lining the walls were facing out. As if she were in a museum, Brieda walked around the studio studying each one. Art history had been Brieda's second major in college, but you didn't need a degree to see that Ryan was an extremely talented artist. When she finished her tour, she turned to him. He had been watching her.

Not feeling really able to find the words to speak of the power and beauty of what she had just seen, she merely said, "You're extremely gifted." Ryan shrugged modestly, and took another look at

the portrait she was standing in front of, a painting of an old man reading a newspaper.

"Have you shown these to anyone?"

"A few people."

"What was their reaction?"

"Cash on the line!" Ryan said, but Brieda could see the pain behind his attempt to be jocular. "When they see them, they want to buy them, so unless I need to sell, I don't show."

"But what about an exhibition? You ought to at least show them to..."

"Nah," Ryan interrupted, gazing, as usual, up at the sky.

"Why not?"

"I don't like criticism."

"What makes you think you'd get negative criticism?" she said. He didn't answer. She continued. "Maybe you don't like praise."

Ryan checked the direction of the wind by licking his finger and holding it out the window.

"Nice weather for flying."

Brieda ran a hand along his strong back. He swayed gently, responding to her touch.

"Where are we going for dinner?" Ryan asked.

"Wherever you want."

He moved close, wrapping his arms around her.

"Are you hungry?" he murmured.

"Yes. For you," she answered, her lips covering his. The insistence of her need for him surprised her. But she followed her instincts. Ryan loved it.

"My tiger," he said. "This is a side of you I hadn't imagined."

"Me either, she whispered. "Let dinner wait."

The next five days were closer to paradise than anything Brieda could ever have imagined. True to his promise, Ryan never left her alone at night; in fact, they

spent almost every waking moment together. They would rise around noon, and Ryan would take her to see the city. Then in the evenings she would make dinner while Ryan worked on the illustrations. Around eleven they would go out and see the nightlife, or meet some of Ryan's friends. Then they would go back to his place and make love for hours. Brieda only went back to her hotel room for a change of clothes and to receive Mrs. Brandyse's increasingly urgent messages. She realized it was silly of Mrs. B. to have to keep paying for a room she wasn't in, but she knew she couldn't exactly explain it all to her.

One morning when Brieda was back at the hotel, the phone rang. Expecting Ryan's voice she picked it up with a warm and intimate "He-ll-o." But it was Mrs. B.

"Oh! How are you?" Brieda unconsciously sat up straight, even though Mrs. B. was three thousand miles away.

"Never mind about me! How are you?"

"Fine! I'm fine!" Brieda was talking loudly, even though the connection was fairly clear.

"How many do you have so far?"

"What?"

"Illustrations! How many has he given you?"

"Oh! Twelve. He's given me twelve. You should see them. They are truly wonderful..."

"Twelve," Mrs. B. interrupted. She was obviously somewhat impressed. "When are you going to get the last one? I mean, I'm sure you're having the time of your life in Paris at my expense, but I do have a deadline!"

"Mrs. Brandyse, I am completely aware of that. Ryan's been having trouble with the final one. I don't know if there's anything I can do to speed up the process. I've done everything I can to..."

"Tell him you're leaving tomorrow,"

Mrs. B. interrupted again.

"What?" These words fell on her ears like knives.

"Maybe he doesn't want to give you the last illustration because he doesn't want you to leave."

Brieda was silent. It was perhaps the truth. But how did Mrs. B. know that? She felt disoriented. These past few nights she had only gotten a few hours sleep, and her mind could not move off Mrs. B.'s words.

"You have to put some pressure on him," Mrs. B. continued. "I'll call Air France for you and arrange a ticket for tomorrow night. All right?"

"Okay," Brieda said, her voice faint.

"I can't hear you."

"Okay!"

"Call me if you have any problems."

"Right," Brieda said, suddenly anxious to terminate the conversation.

"*Au revoir*," Mrs. Brandyse said. Brieda wondered if her tone was intentionally mocking. She had the creepy feeling that Mrs. B. sensed there was something going on between her and Ryan. The only way she could have known that was by talking to Ryan. It gave her a cold knot in the pit of her stomach to think that perhaps Ryan might have spoken to her. But that was unlikely. She put down the phone and stared at her suitcases. The thought of leaving Ryan chilled her to the bone. She stood up and made it as far as the chair. She stared blankly out the window, bracing herself to call Ryan and tell him the news. First she had to face it herself. It was amazing how attached she had grown to him in so short a stretch of time. Now even the thought of spending a night without him was unbearable.

Forcing her mind to regain control over her emotions, she ran through the alternatives. Should she quit her job and stay with Ryan in Paris, as her heart told her to

do? Would he want her to do that? Would their relationship survive the everyday familiarity of living together? Or was it only perfect because they knew their time together was limited? It was a painful thought, but one that she must face.

She got up to pack her bags. She might as well check out. She knew their last night together would be spent at his loft. She packed hurriedly. She wanted to see him as soon as possible. They had only hours left together.

But in the midst of her gloom a thought burst through. Ryan had said he was tired of living in Paris, that creatively he was beginning to feel the restrictions of living in the city of so many masters. Could it be that he meant it? That he might be willing to consider returning home to the States?

The only way to know for sure was to ask him. She picked up the phone and dialed his number. Mme. Lebeau, the concierge answered and Brieda's heart sank when she told her he had gone out. She said he had left a message: "Had a personal emergency. Tried to call you. Your line was busy. I'll call you this evening when I get back."

Brieda imagined the worst. Had his wife changed her mind? Or even more unbearable, had Ryan changed his? She asked the concierge to tell Ryan that she had to go back to New York tomorrow, and that he should call her as soon as he got in. She hung up the phone and slumped back into the chair.

A siren, high-low, high-low, braying like a donkey, woke Brieda. It was after six. She had fallen asleep in her chair, tired from all the walking she had done. She had spent the day wandering in and out of shops, pretending to be in search of purchases, but none of the brightly colored clothes captured her attention. Her mind was on one thing and one thing

only.

Where was he? She called the front desk to check again if there were any messages, but there were not.

Brieda hung up, rearranged her suitcase, restyled her hair, and at 8 o'clock called Ryan. The phone rang many times before Mme. Lebeau answered. Her voice sounded aggravated.

"Hi, it's me again." Brieda had actually gotten somewhat friendly with Mme. Lebeau and her sons since she had been spending so much time there with Ryan, and, conquest supreme, was able to get on her English-speaking side.

"He still isn't back?" she asked.

"He is. He got back in about two hours ago," she said.

"Two hours ago? He did? Did you give him my message?"

"Yes. I gave it. He did not call you back?"

"No." Brieda felt even worse than before.

"He does not come to the telephone. Two other friends have called him tonight. I yell for him, but he will not come. I think something is not right."

"What do you mean?" Brieda asked, afraid of the worst.

"Ah, but, no one came home with him. I know that he is alone. But something is not right."

Brieda was thoughtful. "Do you think I should come over?" She knew it was ridiculous to ask the concierge, but right now she didn't trust her own instincts.

Mme. Lebeau also was thoughtful. "I do not know what to counsel you," she finally said.

"This is my last night in Paris," Brieda said, as if convincing Mme. Lebeau was critical. "I can't stay in this hotel room any longer."

"Well then, come. If he is being monster, then you can stay here with me."

"Thank you, Mme. Lebeau." This kindness meant a great deal to Brieda right now, even though she knew she would never impose in that way.

She paid her hotel bill and took a taxi to Ryan's. Mme. Lebeau met her on the first floor and told her she could leave her suitcase with her instead of carrying it all the way up.

"And besides," she added with a wink, "men get nervous to see a woman to walk in their home with valises."

Brieda returned her smile. She was feeling rather nervous herself.

Ryan's door was not locked, she knew, but she knocked anyway and called his name softly. There was no answer. She opened the door slowly and walked in. In the evening light the studio seemed ethereal. The paintings were gone and the walls were bare. In the dimness she finally saw Ryan sitting on the window ledge. Right away she knew something was wrong. She walked all the way across the studio and stood a few feet away from him before he looked up, startled to discover he wasn't alone.

"You gave me the creeps sitting there in the window like that."

"I sent the chairs out to be reupholstered," he said humorlessly.

She knew better than to kiss him in this mood. "I'm leaving tomorrow night."

"I know."

"Maryse took the paintings?"

"Yep."

Brieda couldn't stand it any longer. "I can't guess what's wrong. Would you be willing to tell me?"

Ryan buried his face in his hands. He was silent a long while.

"I'm not in the mood to talk. Could we meet tomorrow? Maybe for breakfast."

Brieda could hardly believe her ears. "Ryan!" She practically screamed. "I'm leaving tomorrow!"

She instantly wished she hadn't used

that tone of voice, but she had to wake him up. He didn't even look at her. He got up and walked over to where his jacket hung on the wall. He picked up his helmet and headed for the door. Brieda raced ahead of him and stood in front of the door blocking his way.

"Ryan," she pleaded. "Please don't leave like this. Please tell me what's bothering you."

He sighed heavily. For the first time since she had known him, he seemed unable to look into her eyes. It frightened her to see him like this. Gathering her courage, she reached out for his helmet. Surprised at how easily he relinquished it, she tossed it over onto the bed. She did the same with his jacket. Empty-handed, he stared at the floor. Brieda put her arms around him. Slowly, he put his arms around her. She held him tightly and at last he allowed himself to be held.

"Lucien is dead," he finally whispered in her ear.

Shocked, Brieda tightened her hold. She held him for a very long time, knowing there was nothing she could do to relieve his grief.

"He crashed in a race in Germany. Just like Maxie did."

Brieda thought she felt Ryan shiver. She didn't ask for any more details. She had never gotten to meet his closest friend.

The next morning when Brieda awoke, Ryan was not next to her. She reached under her pillow for her watch. It was seven forty-five. She put on her glasses and saw Ryan sitting on the window ledge. He was wearing only his robe. The morning breeze blew his hair softly. He didn't hear her approach as she went over and ruffled a hand through his silky blond hair. He reached back for her hand and gave it a squeeze.

"I have to leave tonight," Brieda said.

Ryan was silent as he drew her closer to him. Brieda couldn't bring herself to mention the final illustration, which she still needed. She closed her eyes, holding back her tears.

"Ryan?"

"What?" His voice was just a whisper.

"I don't think I can live without you."

"I know."

"Come with me to New York." Brieda's voice shook with the courage it took to say these simple words. Ryan looked deeply into her eyes.

"Are you inviting me to come and live with you?"

"Yes. I am."

"Where do you live?"

"I have a small apartment. It's not what you'd call a dreamhouse, but it's cozy."

Ryan smiled. He kissed her passionately. But she didn't want to make love. She had just asked him the most important question she had ever asked any man. Right now she needed an answer, not his passion.

"Ryan! I asked you..."

"I have to make a call. I'll be back in a little..."

"Ryan! Wait. Can't you just tell me whether..."

He was out the door, calling back. "Take a shower. I'll be back in a little while."

Brieda was astounded. Who could he be calling at this hour. Why couldn't he just say yes or no and put her out of her misery? She paced and fumed and finally took a shower. She had made the bed and breakfast before he returned, in a burst of energy, with an empty suitcase. Brieda stared at him as he began gathering up some papers.

"Mme. Lebeau gave me this suitcase. I only have one."

The realization that he was packing up his belongings finally registered. She ran

into his arms, toppling him over onto the bed.

"Does this mean you're coming with me?" she screamed.

"Yeah," Ryan said, obviously surprised that she had to ask that question. Brieda smothered him with kisses. The thought that he might follow her back to New York in a month or so was something she had barely allowed herself to hope. The idea that he might come with her right now had never even occurred to her.

It was almost five o'clock when they headed downstairs with Ryan's suitcases. It was amazing to her that he could pack up seven years of his life in France in two suitcases.

"Don't you have to say goodbye to anybody?" Brieda asked, as they made their way down the five flights. She was glad she only had to carry her flight bag.

"The only person I wish I could say goodbye to is gone."

Brieda instantly regretted her insensitivity to Ryan's loss. She was too excited about his decision to move to America.

He saw her sombre mood, and quickly lightened it. "I'll send them postcards," he teased.

"What about your paintings?"

"Maryse will sell them, or keep them. I don't care. I want to move on. They remind me of where I've been."

"But you *did* them. They are too wonderful to just..."

"I can paint new ones," Ryan said, as if that should be obvious. He kissed her, and her confused look faded and changed into one of love.

Mme. Lebeau met them on the sidewalk and kissed Ryan warmly. He told her she could have anything in the apartment she wanted, and apologized for leaving so much behind.

After a round of farewell kisses, Ryan hailed a taxi.

"Let's go," he said, pulling Brieda into the cab.

As they drove to the airport, holding hands, Brieda was smiling from ear to ear. Ryan tapped her nose with his finger.

"Know what I think?"

"What?" Brieda said, looking into his eyes.

"I think you're falling down on the job."

It took Brieda a moment to remember that she had a job. "Why?"

"You forgot to ask me about this." Ryan took a rolled up paper from his jacket. Brieda knew it was the final illustration. She laughed, realizing she had in fact completely forgotten her mission. She unrolled it and saw a picture of Herr Hare with his new bride outside their cottage. They looked very much in love. There was a sign above the door reading "Home Sweet Home." There were two hearts above their heads as they looked into each other's eyes. It was a perfect illustration for the end of the story.

"When did you do this?" Brieda said. "It's wonderful."

"Several days ago. I just didn't want to tell you they were all done."

"Why not?"

"Because I wasn't sure then if you'd invite me to come to New York with you."

Brieda rested her head on his shoulder. He always seemed one step ahead.

The taxi pulled to a stop at Orly Airport. Brieda could scarcely believe that she had landed here less than two weeks ago.

"Remember when you said I was a romantic?" Brieda asked..

"Yes," Ryan said. "I didn't tell you I was one too."

"But I knew you were," Brieda said.

They walked through the airport lobby hand in hand, bravely looking forward to their dream of a life together. ♥

# Love With A Proper Stranger

*From their first meeting Anya Meredith feels as though she's always known Brady Durant, but her faith in the handsome stranger is tested when he embroils her in a dangerous intrigue involving a mysterious music box:*

CHRISTA MERLIN

**T**he first thing Anya Meredith noticed about the man entering Postons' Art and Antiques Shop was his hurried stride and the quick, sweeping glance he gave the small antique bibelots in the glass wall case. Even her short experience had taught her to watch for a man in a hurry for a last-minute gift. In the tiny resort town of Helen, Georgia, the buying customer was king.

The man was staring at the contents of

the glass case as Anya approached. She was surprised by her first reaction—that tiny jolt a woman feels when she sees an attractive man. Why? Not his clothes—the usual worn jeans, plaid shirt, and boots so many of the local populace wore. Maybe the lean, tall body, the rumpled black hair. Anyway, there was something...

"May I help you?"

Black brows shot upward as he turned.



"Well, hello, there! I expected Mrs. Poston."

So, he was a friend or acquaintance of her cousin, Marilee Poston. Anya's smile went from professional to friendly. "Marilee will be in this afternoon if you need special help..." She had been planning to say more, but a totally illogical sense of recognition, a feeling of familiarity, had swept through her as she met his gaze.

"You'll do just fine." He sounded as if he meant it.

"What do you have in mind?" she asked. Now, why did that simple question suddenly sound provocative?

"Well," the man said, a touch of laughter in his voice, "I was looking for something small and expensive."

"We have many things that are small and expensive," Anya said shortly, keeping her eyes on the shelves. "Can you be more specific?" She could feel those blue eyes appraising her. Well, he'd find nothing exciting. Only a thirty-one-year-old woman with plain brown hair and green eyes too big for her face. A decent figure, maybe, but hardly tantalizing in the straight skirt, oversized shirt, and medium-heel pumps she wore in the shop.

"Yes, I think I can be very specific. What I'm after is something you probably wouldn't like."

"Wouldn't like?"

"Exactly." His face crinkled by a grin, he swung to look at the shelves again. "Think of a beautiful little blonde who has already acquired everything she wants."

That was easy. Anya thought of Charlotte Martin. No, Charlotte Meredith, now. Blond, small, and beautiful, Charlotte had everything she wanted—including Tom Meredith, Anya's ex-husband. Anya's softly contoured mouth compressed. She watched somberly as he pushed back the glass door

of the case and reached in for an ornately carved silver music box. Then she smiled slightly.

"I think you've found it, sir. It's small, very expensive, and I don't like it."

"Sir?" He laughed, taking the music box from its place, examining it. "I'm Brady Durant, Miss...?"

"Mrs.," Anya corrected stiffly. "Mrs. Meredith." She waited, sure that he would put the box back in its place and leave the shop. The price was on the bottom and she didn't think him fool enough to pay eight hundred dollars for a trinket.

"Why does it cost so much?" he asked casually. "It doesn't even play a tune."

Silently, Anya reached over and twisted one of the intricate roses on the side of the box. Immediately, the tinkling strains of an out-of-tune Chopin piano etude filled the air. Durant looked at her and laughed. "That's worth eight hundred dollars?"

"Not to me," Anya said recklessly. "But I'm not a collector. A collector would know it's worth more than its price. It's one of a kind, made by the famous Jacob Bruner. Marilee ordered it from France on a written request from a collector."

Durant's gaze moved up from the costly toy in his hands and met her eyes. "If it was ordered for a collector, why is it for sale?"

The look jolted Anya. "Because the man never came for it," she blurted out, "or answered her letters. So Marilee put it on the shelf and brought the price down. It's still too expensive, but at eight hundred she's only breaking even..." She stopped, flushing, and added lamely, "I know how that last remark sounds, but it's the truth."

"I believe you," Durant said solemnly. "One thing you aren't is a hard-sell saleslady." He handed her the box. "I'll take it. It's perfect."

Anya stood there, shocked as he reached for his wallet and handed her a MasterCard. Marilee was going to be ecstatic. Neither she nor her husband, Roger, thought they would ever get their money out of the Bruner box.

"I'll gift-wrap it for you," she offered, handing him the slip to sign, feeling an excited sense of triumph. "Oh, I forgot to show you how it opens." She reached for the box again and touched a tiny hidden catch beneath a carved rose. The lid sprang up, revealing a padded red velvet interior. "If your wife, or friend, has a very small secret, she can hide it there." Excitement had put a sparkle in her emerald green eyes. Durant's eyes roved over her warmly.

"I don't have a wife," he said deliberately. "It's for my sister-in-law." He glanced at his wristwatch and then back at her face. "By the time you finish wrapping that, it'll be noon. Will you have lunch with me?"

Anya's delicate brows drew together slightly. She still wasn't ready for even a mild flirtation, especially with a man as attractive and compelling as this one.

"Thank you," she said, putting a touch of coolness in her voice, "but I don't get off until one, and I have a busy afternoon ahead of me."

"You still have to eat," he said easily. "I'll come back."

Anya stared after him as he crossed the busy street, opened the door of a huge dark green van, and tossed the package in, climbing in after it. She shuddered, thinking of the delicate mechanism in that Bruner. Well, it was his now. But she wasn't, not even for lunch. Marilee, who was supposed to be in by twelve, would arrive as usual at twelve-thirty. And Marilee would explain why her cousin had to leave early.

Marilee came dashing in at exactly twelve-thirty, apologizing profusely for

being late.

"It's inevitable!" she exclaimed. "This time, Sara fell down the steps and bruised her chin. At least, I think it was Sara . . . or was it Susan?"

Anya laughed as Marilee spread her hands and grimaced helplessly. The Poston twins, at two and a half, were the youngest of five Poston children, and by far the most time-consuming. Anya had extended her visit to the Postons to fill in at the shop while Marilee tried out new baby-sitters. The twins had worn out the last one. "How's the new sitter?" Anya asked.

"Great, if she'll stay. She doesn't like being out so far in the country." She sighed and looked around the empty shop. "Business as usual in September, I suppose. Slow."

The perfect opening. Anya smiled and spared no time or detail in telling Marilee about the sale of the Bruner music box.

Marilee collapsed in a chair, laughing. "No matter how you did it, cuz, you've made my day, my week, my month! I had begun to hate that box."

Anya smiled. "Fortunately, I didn't like it, either. Now, you will tell him I couldn't wait for the lunch date he thinks he has with me, won't you?"

"He asked you out? You bet I will! I want you to start dating, but not with a nut like that. What's his name?"

Anya thought. "Brady Durant, he said."

Marilee shot upward in her chair. "Anya! Brady Durant is no nut!" Marilee's face took on a look of cunning. "Listen, stay and have lunch with him."

"No," Anya interrupted. "I don't like him." That wasn't quite true. "I mean, I don't feel I'm ready to—to get involved with a man." Now *that* was true.

"Listen," Marilee said intensely, "he's single, around the right age, very nice-looking, a highly respected painter, and an

interesting, creative person. Considerably better than that unimaginative clod who threw you over for a sex-symbol blonde."

"Mr. Durant bought that music box for a blonde," Anya said. "He described her, and I would have sworn he was talking about Charlotte. What does that tell you?"

Marilee sighed and sprawled down into the chair again. "It tells me to shut up." She gave Anya a small smile. "It was a good idea while it lasted."

Anya was slightly ashamed of herself for not adding that the blonde was Durant's sister-in-law, but she knew from experience how hard it was to convince Marilee in an argument. Anya would still have been at the shop at one o'clock if she hadn't been a bit deceptive. She left, going out onto the wide sidewalk and making her way through the crowd toward her car.

Helen was a town of peaked roofs and gay banners, a piece of Disney World, dropped down in the steep foothills of northern Georgia. But all around the small and highly competitive tourist attraction were the quiet reaches of mountains and forests. Raising her eyes to the green distances, she thought with longing that what she would really like would be a picnic in the woods. Sitting on the bank of a mountain stream with a friend...

"There you are." Out of the flow of strangers around her, a hand grasped her arm, a tall body hovered over her. "Lucky I saw you," Durant added, amused. "I would have missed you at the shop, wouldn't I? Trying to escape me, Mrs. Meredith?"

Anya struggled with a blush and lost. He was carrying a bag marked with the colorful insignia of the Bavarian Food Stall, and the aromas coming from it were mouth-watering. *He* was mouth-watering. She forced herself to frown.

"How do you know I'm not meeting a

two-hundred-pound, insanely jealous husband? Or don't you care?"

A grin quirked up at one side of his mouth. "I would say you don't have a husband at present, or you'd be wearing a ring. Some women don't, but you would. Or am I wrong?"

Anya wished she could lie. "No, you aren't wrong," she admitted weakly. "I don't have a husband at present, but I do have plans."

"To marry?" He was still smiling, still amused. Anya fought to suppress a smile but lost. "No, just plans to go shopping."

"That settles it," Durant said, and turned her toward the huge van. "You can't brave the crowds here on an empty stomach. We're going on a picnic. I know a place with a stream..."

Recognizing the hand of fate, Anya gave in gracefully. Why argue when it was exactly what she wanted...

"Nice," she said a minute later, settling down in a big bucket seat. As Durant went around to get in the other side, she glanced back through the well-outfitted interior behind her. "Your home away from home?"

"Right," he said easily. "I live in this in the summers, traveling the mountains. I paint, mostly landscapes." He looked at her and smiled slowly. "I'd like to paint you."

"Really?" Anya asked, poker-faced. "What color?"

He burst into laughter, his craggy face creasing, and eased the heavy van out into traffic. "Pink, probably. I like it when you blush." His left hand came over and enclosed her fingers in a hard warmth. "I like *you*, Mrs. Meredith. Are you going to tell me your first name?"

She leaned back, curling silken legs half under her, smoothing her skirt over them. "A small price for a picnic, Mr. Durant. My name is Anya."

"Anya," he said, testing it, almost

tasting it. "Unusual, which suits you."

Anya was watching the side of the mountain whirling past, thinking how quickly the country went from civilized to primeval. "Tell me how far we're going."

"Five miles—maybe six," he said. "You'll like it."

She thought how positive he sounded. As if he had known her for years and had all her likes and dislikes catalogued in his mind. She glanced at him again. Then she looked away, biting the soft underside of her lower lip. She hated feeling vulnerable to a man, and she definitely felt vulnerable to this one.

Staring from the window, Anya wondered idly if she had married Tom Meredith merely because she had never felt vulnerable to him. He had been calm and sensible, an older man who talked about his golf game and grew roses in the backyard. Life with Tom had been pleasant and sexually adequate, but he had never thought much about passion until he met Charlotte. Then he had thought of nothing else.

Anya had given him his freedom with little regret and no pain. That, she thought, was the value of not being vulnerable. She glanced again at Brady Durant with that same tiny jolt of awareness she had felt when she saw him first, and this time her instinct went further, informing her sagely to be wary.

Brady's picnic spot was a short walk through the dense stand of trees where he had parked the van. They came out to a mossy slope of bank and a wide, clear stream that tumbled down a terraced fall of rocks and rushed past. Anya stood entranced, the bag of food forgotten in her arms.

"It's beautiful here." She sounded surprised, and Durant laughed. He had put beer in a cleft in the rocks, half submerged in the icy water, and was spreading a blanket on the moss.

"I told you you'd like it."

Anya faced toward him. "What makes you think you know me so well, Mr. Durant?"

"Brady."

She smiled, mostly because she couldn't help it. "Brady, then. What makes you think you know me so well, Brady?"

Reaching, he lifted the bag from her arms and stood looking down at her thoughtfully. "I'm not sure. Call it instant recognition. Hasn't it ever happened to you?"

Sensation chased along Anya's spine, tightened her throat. "It couldn't happen to me," she said, making it light. "Until I came here, I had always lived in the same small town. Everyone I met I really *had* known forever."

"And now everyone is a stranger?" Brady asked.

His voice had been gently teasing, as if he had known in spite of her how she felt. "Everyone but Marilee and Roger," she said. "Marilee is my cousin. I stayed to help in the shop while she found a new baby-sitter." She had come, and stayed, because she couldn't bear being a discarded wife in a small town, but that was hard to admit even to herself. "Anyway," she added recklessly, "I'm leaving for New York, where I don't know anyone at all. That should be exciting, don't you think?"

"What I think," Brady said, taking her hand and pulling her back up on the bank to the blanket, "is that I'd better make it so exciting here that you won't want to leave. I don't meet a woman I've known forever every day. In fact," he added, putting the bag down and turning her to face him, "I've never met one I know as well as I know you. I think—no, I'm sure—I even know how it's going to be when I kiss you."

Jolted to her toes, Anya pulled away.

"If that's a come-on," she said, shakily sarcastic, "it's not a very good one." She sat down on the blanket as far from him as she could manage and reached for the bag. "If you know me so well," she added, desperately trying for lightness, "you'd know I'm starving."

After a while, Anya laid aside her half-eaten sandwich and held a glass of beer in both slim hands, glad for the chill.

"Too much for you?"

She nodded numbly. Both the sandwich and the man who had bought it were too much for her. "It's very good, though," she said politely.

With one finger, Brady drew back the curtain of hair nearest himself and hooked it behind a small ear. His palm closed on her chin and turned her face to his. Anya looked at him like a fledgling bird would look at a cat, all eyes and ruffled feathers, hypnotized.

"It seems to me it's a bit early for this," she said strangled.

"No, it's not," he said huskily. "I want to see if I was right."

In a split-second, she was flat on her back, half covered by his warmth, his scent in her nostrils and his tongue doing indescribably sensuous things to her mouth.

She wrenched her face away, managing a broken sound. "Br-Brady..."

"Mmm-m-m," he breathed, "even sweeter than I thought it would be."

With a sound somewhere between a moan and a whimper, she yielded. Her tense muscles relaxed by themselves and melted against him.

Breaking off the kiss, breathing hard, Brady raised his head and looked down into half-closed, sultry green eyes. She was his right now, and they both knew it.

"Anya..."

Anya stared up at him in dazed surprise, hearing the tortured sound of warn-

ing in his voice. Muscles rippled along a set jaw as he forced himself away from her and sat up, hunching over his knees.

"I'm sorry," he said flatly. "Too much too soon. Right?"

He glanced around at the puzzled, hurt expression on her softened face and scooped her up savagely, holding her tight against his side. "Love, another second of that and I wouldn't have stopped. And somehow I don't think you're the kind that goes on a picnic with a stranger and ends up making love in the crumbs." He pushed the thick hair back from her flushed face and managed his grin. "Are you? We can always start over."

"I'm not," Anya said shakily, "but I would have been this time. Something happened..."

"We happened," Brady said, and pulled her closer, tucking her head under his chin, wrapping both arms around her.

Anya had no difficulty understanding his problem. Her own body was screaming, *Why not?* She picked up her shoes and the crumpled handful of pantyhose and disappeared into the edge of the woods. When she came back, she was properly dressed and very subdued.

"End of Act One," Brady said softly. "Mad at me?"

"No," Anya said, "just confused. I wanted you very much." Her clear green eyes met his with utter candor. "I didn't want to stop, but I'm glad you did." She saw his steady gaze deepen.

"Are you always that honest with a man?"

"Never."

"Then why with me?"

"Because you're a stranger, I suppose," Anya said thoughtfully. "You know—it's like telling your problems to a person on a ship or a train. You can be honest then, because when the trip is over, you'll never see him again."

His mouth was marked again by ten-

derness. "What if suddenly you end up in the same place, love?"

She looked at him uncertainly. "Why, I guess you'd hate each other for knowing too much, or, maybe you'd be very close."

"I'll settle for that," Brady said, and turned her toward the van.

Later, Anya drove back to her cousin's house alone. The Poston home was outside of town, set on the southern slope of a hill and overlooking a wooded ravine. It was rather isolated, since the land around it on three sides was part of the Chatahoochee National Forest, and the Postons had no neighbors. Anya noted with surprise, that tonight there was a police cruiser parked in front of the porch, a trooper leaning on the hood and a distracted-looking Marilee listening to what he had to say.

Pulling in behind the cruiser, thinking of the worst things first, she jumped out, her eyes on Marilee's face. Then Marilee gave her a careless grin.

"It's nothing," Marilee said reassuringly.

The trooper frowned. "Don't take it lightly, Mrs. Poston. The men are considered dangerous. You're advised to use every precaution. Be sure your doors are bolted securely and your windows locked. If you see anyone who looks suspicious..."

"I'll call," Marilee said, "right away." She gave him a sudden grin. "We have five children and three dogs. A man would have to be crazy to break in here."

The trooper surveyed her coolly. "This kind likes hostages, ma'am. Take no chances." He nodded at Anya, then climbed back into the cruiser.

Anya shivered, going toward the house. "Hostages, good Lord! What is it—escaped convicts?"

Marilee shrugged. "Escaped suspects,

not convicts. Two political prisoners who managed to get away from federal authorities before they were tried. But they were last seen a hundred miles north of here, so I think the police are just being super careful." She hesitated. "Except they seem to think there's some connection in Helen." She looked at Anya seriously. "Please don't mention it in front of the children. I don't want them frightened."

Anya nodded. "But we don't live in Helen."

"They say the men are connected in some way with a renegade bunch of survivalists who wander the national forest. But we're nowhere near the remote areas the survivalists like. Don't let it bother you, cuz." She came up with her usual sparkling smile and put her hand on the door. "Come on in here, where it's really dangerous."

Anya's bedroom was on the third floor of the old house, the windows facing the wooded ravine below. That night as she looked out over the moon-silvered forest, the shadowy depths she had thought so innocently pretty before now seemed, like the depths of her newly discovered emotions, wild and mysterious, holding and hiding something dangerous. She shivered, thinking of Brady's plundering mouth on hers, and the wild, uncontrollable way her body had responded.

She had gotten away this time, but the sooner she left here and settled into a job in New York, the better. A man with that kind of magic could tear a woman's heart out.

"I hate to ask you," Marilee said at breakfast, "but could you stay on until they catch those men? Then I could be here in the mornings, and Roger plans to drop by every afternoon. I'd feel safer, and so will my new baby-sitter, Betty Sue. I'm afraid she'll quit. She's nervous out

here anyway."

There was no way to refuse. Anya sighed inwardly and brought out a smile.

"Of course I'll stay. No one in New York is holding his breath waiting for me to report to work." She finished her coffee and stood up. "I'll get dressed and go open up the shop."

Marilee laughed, surprised. "On Sunday? Only Roger works on Sunday—he's out showing a house."

Anya blinked. "I see why you want me to stay," she said wryly. "Where else could you find such an alert, with-it saleslady? Okay, I've got a day off. I'll wash my hair, my clothes, my car..."

Anya was crouched on the back steps brushing her hair dry in the sunshine when she heard the low-pitched whine of a diesel engine coming up the incline from the highway. She wasn't surprised. She had been half listening for the van.

Conquering a wild impulse to leap up, run around the corner of the house, and hide, Anya stood up on shaking legs, tossed back her mass of shining hair, and turned as Marilee's bright face poked out the back door.

"Brady Durant is here," Marilee said, sotto voice. "Why didn't you tell me he was coming? Anyway, he's here, and you'd better go rescue him before he's inundated with kids. My children, unfortunately, love strangers." She swept over Anya with a glance as she turned and opened the door again. "Unless you'd like to skip up the back stairs and fix yourself up a bit?"

Anya shook her head. What difference did it make how she looked? The worse the better, maybe. She gathered her courage and strode ahead of Marilee. At the open door of the living room she saw Brady sitting in Roger's big chair, covered with children. Becky, Steven, and Sara were all on his lap; Roger, Jr., was leaning on his shoulder; and Susan, a thumb in

her mouth and a crayon in her hand, had her back to him. She was beginning a mural. Long, masterful strokes of brilliant red swept across the wall. Brady looked up and grinned at her.

It was just as Anya had thought it would be. One look at that grin and she melted.

Marilee swept into the room behind her, grabbed the red crayon from Susan's hand, and smacked her bottom. Carrying the indignantly screaming child out, she turned at the door and looked at the others.

"Mr. Durant came to see Annie Anya," she said with meaning. "Mind your manners."

Children fell from Brady's lap like a waterfall and flowed out the door after their mother, shutting it carefully behind them. Brady looked at Anya.

"Annie Anya?" His voice was soft, intimate, teasing.

"Some of them can't pronounce Auntie," she said shortly. She was embarrassed now by her appearance. Brady looked wonderful. The gabardine slacks were set off by a silky white shirt; a matching jacket hung over the back of the chair. And here she was in bare feet and jeans, this awful sweater.

"Go change," Brady said pleasantly, giving her a weird feeling of being transparent. "We're going to Atlanta."

Anya whirled and stared at him. "I can't. I—well, it's too far. And, besides, I don't like cities."

"It's not far, and we won't be inside the city." Brady stood up, clasped her shoulders, and drew her close. She put her hands against his chest, but somehow the silky feel of his shirt and the hard warmth beneath it coaxed the hands around to his back.

"No."

"Yes." He caught her mouth with his. She was still, gasping under the sensuous



magic of his firm mouth.

"Oh! Excuse me..."

Anya hadn't heard the door open, but she heard it close after the surprised grunt and apology. She jerked away, her already flushed face turning pinker.

"Roger came home," she whispered. "He saw us."

"So he did," Brady said in a normal tone, though he looked dazed. "Who cares?" He tried to pull her back into his arms, but she stepped away.

"I'll change," she said in a quick reversal of attitude. "I won't be a minute." She fled, practically running from the room and up the stairs. With any luck, she could throw on something and be out of the house before Roger told what he had seen and aroused Marilee's insatiable curiosity.

"We're going to a small town," Brady said, turning from the Postons' private road onto the highway, "just outside Atlanta. There's a regional art show going on there, and I thought you might like to see it."

"I like art shows," she said, making an effort to sound politely agreeable. "Are you exhibiting in it?"

He shook his head. "I wanted the trip, that's all." He settled back in the seat and looked over with a grin. "So we could be alone with my hands occupied. Otherwise, how could I tell you the story of my life?" He wiggled his thick brows at her with a comical leer.

Anya pulled her jacket shut. "Tell me the story of your life," she said.

"Well, I'm thirty-seven years old and considered reasonably normal by my friends. I make a scanty living by painting, nicely supplemented by a trust fund left to me by my parents. And," he added, his smile fading, "I've been married. A long, dreary time ago." He was staring at the road again. "I hope none of that

makes a difference to you."

"How could it?" Anya's voice was strained. "It's quite a lot like mine, given a difference of six years." She stared out into the woodlands, deeply jealous of a woman she didn't know, a woman who had once lain in his arms. "Why are you telling me this, anyway?"

"So I won't be a stranger," Brady said, his grin coming back. "Are you beginning to know me? A totally irresponsible wanderer—who happens to be crazy about you."

Anya twisted in the seat, her green eyes startled. "Are you? Crazy about me, I mean?"

"God, yes," Brady said feelingly, and reached for her hand, gripping it hard. "You hit me like a ton of bricks, Annie Anya. I feel like a— a kid." He slowed the suddenly wavering van and then awkwardly bumped off the pavement. They sat staring into each other's eyes. "Couldn't you tell?" Brady asked hoarsely, still gripping her hand. "Or have you just been trying to tell me to get lost?"

Anya's heart bounced wildly. "Not — not exactly. I'm not leaving as soon as I thought..." What was she saying? That they had time for a short affair? She drew in a deep breath. "Listen," she added awkwardly. "I'm crazy about you, too. But I'm not very interesting once you get to know me."

"You interest me," he said huskily, "to the point of complete distraction. Damn these bucket seats!"

In spite of the seats, the kiss was long and very satisfactory.

"Then it's settled?" Brady's blue gaze was a sky full of stars to Anya. "We're crazy about each other?"

Anya laughed shakily and collapsed back into her seat. "That sounds like an accurate description." Crazy was right. That short affair would happen, and she

wasn't the kind for a short affair. She glanced at him as he settled into his seat and started the engine. Maybe, just this once...

Reaching the small town of Brooksville, they wound their way through to find the signs and flying banners of the Hungry Artists' Fall Show.

In the main exhibition room were scores of paintings. Taking her hand, Brady began a slow circuit of the walls.

"Hmmm-m, Jensen is improving," he said, stopping in front of a large group of portraits.

Anya looked. But when Brady continued to study the portraits, she began to look at the people around them. Then a woman caught her eye, a truly beautiful woman with gold hair and violet eyes, dressed in an amazing outfit made of silk scarves. An artist or an entertainer? She was about to ask Brady when the woman faced their way.

"Brady!" The woman came half running, while beside her Anya felt Brady stiffen and turn.

"Hello, Morgan," he said flatly as the woman arrived, and put out his hand. "How are—"

The woman ignored the hand and pulled his head down to kiss him thoroughly. "I'm not your mother-in-law, Brady! Don't greet me like one! How are you, darling?"

"Fine." Frowning, Brady reached for Anya. "Anya, this is Morgan Whitcomb, my sister-in-law. Anya Meredith, Morgan. Now, tell me, what in hell are you doing at a regional art show? As I remember, you always said they were tacky."

"Ah, but that was before I had anything to show," Morgan said, laughing. "I'm showing my collection, darling—I've included that lovely music box you found for me. And, by the way, I'll have Whit write you a check for it.

He's guarding the collection while I cruise around." She turned to Anya with a bright smile. "Brady found the loveliest treasure for me."

"Only after you told me where it was and insisted I buy it for you," Brady growled, but then smiled and tightened an arm around Anya. "Not that I object. That's where I found Anya. She sold it to me."

Morgan froze. "You own Postons' Art and Antiques?"

"Oh, no." Puzzled, Anya wondered why Morgan cared. "The Postons are relatives. I've been helping out during a visit."

"I see," Morgan looked wary. "Well, I won't keep you two. I imagine you have plans." She was turning away. "I'd better get back to my corner. Whit doesn't know a thing about selling or trading."

"About that check," Brady said pleasantly. "We'll follow you over and get it now. Where Whit is, money is, right?"

Morgan tossed her head. "Whit won't mind paying you. He knows it was worth it."

Anya concealed surprise as she was introduced to Paul Whitcomb. Pleasant and assured, he was well past middle age, with a shock of white hair and deepset, kindly eyes in a wrinkled face.

"Darling," Morgan said sweetly, "will you write out a check for Brady? You know, for my lovely music box?"

"Certainly." The deepset eyes gleamed. "I had it appraised, Brady, and it's worth far more than you paid. I'm still surprised at you, finding something so valuable in that little tourist trap."

"Come look at the collection while Whit takes care of that," Morgan said quickly, and drew them both toward the shelves. "See? I've given top billing to Jacob Bruner's masterpiece."

Grandly alone on the top shelf, the

silver music box had its own small light placed to bring out the deep and elaborate carving. The card propped beside it read: not for sale or trade.

Then Brady was pocketing a check and holding out his hand.

"Ready to go, Anya?" His hand closed tightly over hers. "I think we've seen enough, haven't we?"

They had barely begun to look at the exhibits. But Brady wanted to leave, now.

"Of course." She nodded politely at Morgan and Whit. "Glad to have met you." Brady was walking away, taking her with him. "Good-bye." Anya called over her shoulder. "I hope I'll see you again."

"I hope you won't." Brady muttered savagely. "I can't stand being around that woman."

"Whatever else she may be," she said, "you'll have to admit she's still friendly to you. That's unusual, after a divorce."

"I should have told you," Brady interrupted harshly, "we weren't divorced. My wife, Elisha, was killed in a car accident. She and Morgan were identical twins, and very close. I can't look at Morgan without seeing Elisha."

"Oh, God," Anya said faintly, "I'm so sorry. I shouldn't have taken it for granted..."

Brady pulled her against his side with a savage gesture. "It's all in the past, love. If Morgan would leave me alone, it could stay there. I'm a fool to let her upset me after ten years."

Once they were in the van, Brady switched on the stereo. Soft music poured around them as he reached and fastened a safety belt around Anya. "We're cutting out," he said, and smiled at her. "I'm not letting Morgan spoil our day. We'll stop for a good dinner on the way home and forget this mistake."

She smiled back. "Let's go," she said. "It's forgotten."

But, of course, it wasn't. When they had finished their dinner at a local inn and strolled outside, Anya's mental image of Brady's lost love came back with smashing force. He had turned to her, his hand holding hers.

"I'd like to stay," he said quietly. "Would you?"

A young and beautiful face, very like Morgan's, had seemed to float in the twilight between them. Who could compete with a ghost? Anya turned away, hesitating, and felt his hand drop from hers.

"It's all right," he said evenly. "I said we'd give it time. Come on, I'll take you home."

At the Poston home, they had to use the key. The house was locked up tightly. Anya thought of the trooper's warning and was glad Brady was with her. Coming into the dark hall, they were surprised by the glow of the kitchen light shining in the rear.

"Is that you, Anya?" Marilee appeared in the kitchen doorway in a robe and slippers. "Oh, and Brady! Good! You'll never believe what has happened."

Sitting at the kitchen table, Marilee spun out her tale dramatically. "We were ready for bed when someone knocked on the door. I was afraid to open it, but Roger insisted that criminals don't knock, and *he* opened it. So, here were these two men, very well dressed, apologizing for the hour but saying they had an urgent reason." She paused. "Well, they wanted the Bruner box!" Marilee burst out. "I asked if they were collectors, and they said they were agents for one, and Brady, I do believe you can make a nice profit if you want to sell. They said they'd pay the appraised price."

Brady leaned back and laughed wryly. "But I bought it for a collector, and she's paid for it. I doubt if she'll sell, but you can tell them I'll call her and give her the

information."

Anya winced. One more time he would have to contact Morgan. But it couldn't be helped. "Odd," she said finally. "Do you suppose it's the same man who wrote to you, Marilee? The one who ordered it?"

Marilee shook her head. "It wasn't him. They wouldn't tell me the name of the man they work for, but they did say it wasn't Morgan Whitcomb."

Anya's eyes shot to Brady's face and saw the same shock she felt. "I'd better be going," he said with an attempt at casualness. "See me to the door, Anya?"

She followed him out into the dark hall.

"She *used* me," he said violently, "and damn her, it's the last time. She'll pay the price she agreed to pay when she ordered it, or I'll take the box back and bring it to the Postons' shop. Either she plays fair for once in her life, or I'll tell Whit some of her background she doesn't want him to know. She learned these tricks from a gang of thieves and cheats she used to run with before she met Whit—hell, maybe she still does! But I'm not going to let her gyp the Postons."

His face was a mask of anger as he swung away and then hesitated at the top of the steps. Turning back, he caught Anya in a close embrace. "Please," he said finally, his deep voice strained, "don't blame me for losing my temper. She's ruined the best day I've had for years—a day with you, Annie Anya."

"There will be more days," she murmured, intoxicated all over again. At this moment, she bitterly regretted her hesitation in the parking lot of the inn.

"When Anya? When will you come away with me?" he breathed.

Anya threw caution to the wind. "Soon," she whispered, "very soon."

Anya had never felt more alive. Swoop-

ing around the bends of the road into Helen the next morning was like flying. Her doubts were gone, swept away by Brady's last passionate embrace. Walking toward the shop she slowed, wondering. There were never customers at this time of day, but standing patiently in front of the shop were two men. As she came up beside them and inserted her key in the door, she said cheerfully, "A good start for the day, customers waiting."

The men both laughed and followed her in.

"Now, gentlemen," Anya said brightly, "what can I do for you?"

The taller man cleared his throat. "Mrs. Poston tells us that you know the man who bought the Jacob Bruner music box and that you might be able to put us in touch with him. We are interested in making an offer for it."

The man's eyes were calm and expressionless, there was absolutely nothing in his tone but a courteous interest, yet Anya felt chilled. "The man who bought it didn't keep it," she said slowly. "However," she added quickly, "Mr. Durant—he's the original buyer—does know of your interest. He's meeting with the collector today, and I'm sure he will ask her if she'd like to sell it." She wasn't at all sure of that, but with the cool eyes on her it seemed a good thing to say.

"When will you know?"

"Oh, today," Anya said hastily. "I expect him around noon."

The taller man nodded and looked at his companion, who pulled a card from his pocket and handed it to Anya. "Alpenhof Motel, Miss. Just tell Mr. Durant to come directly to Unit Twelve." He smiled. "Whether the collector wishes to sell or not, we would like to see Mr. Durant. We can make him an interesting offer."

"I'll tell him," Anya promised. She watched them stalk out of the shop, then

away along the flowery street, two solemn crows in their dark suits, and then turned to greet a chattering trio of tourists entering the shop.

At a quarter to twelve, Anya glanced past a customer's shoulder and encountered Brady's blue gaze. How a man as big as he was moved so silently she didn't know, but he was there, waiting quietly and holding a package—a package the size and shape of the music box.

"The buyers," Brady said simply, his eyes warm on her glowing face. "Do you know how I can find them?"

She thrust a slim hand in her pocket and came up with the card. "Are you really going to sell it to them?" she asked. "Won't Morgan be furious?"

Brady's eyes met hers with a look of pained disgust. "She finally admitted ordering it and agreeing to pay the full amount," he said. "But she refuses to make up the difference. So I took it."

Anya drew in her breath. "How?"

Brady shrugged. "Tore up Whit's check, picked it up, and walked out. Morgan did a lot of foul-mouthed screaming, and threatened to call the police. I pointed out to her that I had proof I had bought it and she didn't. That stopped her." He looked at Anya with a wry smile. "I'll see those men and come back. When can you get away?"

"Soon," Anya said, and blushed at the word. "That is, Marilee will be taking over before one o'clock." She saw him check his watch and added hastily, "That isn't time enough for you to see the buyers, but I—I'll wait for you."

"Annie Anya," he whispered, "I'll be back as fast as I can."

Two hours later Anya came angling across the street toward the van where Brady sat waiting, eyes glinting emerald as she looked up and saw him watching her. She gave him a gamine grin over a large

bag with the insignia of the Bavarian Food Stall emblazoned on its bulging side.

"There," she said, and pushed the bag into his arms as he stepped out. "The only thing different is a bottle of wine. All right?"

Staring down at her, Brady shifted the bag to one arm. "Of course. But are you sure you want to brave the outdoors? It's supposed to rain later."

Enveloped in his warm aura, Anya felt a certain tension in his long, muscular body, heard the question behind the question. Her eyes flickered away from his deep blue gaze and settled on the middle button of his shirt.

"Does the van leak?"

As Brady helped her up through the open door he said, "It does not. In fact it can be very cozy in wet weather."

Anya smiled and situated herself back in the seat. Brady had understood without questions. He made his own decisions fast and without regret. Like selling the music box. She bit her lip, thinking of Morgan.

"Did you really sell the music box to those men, Brady?"

Brady's face hardened into stillness. "Stop worrying about it, love. The box was never really Morgan's. You sold it to me, remember?" He gave her a tight smile. "Let's both forget it. The damned thing has been nothing but trouble."

"You're right," Anya conceded. With relief, she kicked off her shoes and folded her long legs beneath her, relaxing. Morgan had been unethical and he had straightened it out. And that was the end of it.

Less than an hour later, the van stopped by a copse of huge trees. Brady switched off the ignition and reached for Anya, lifting her, somehow, into his lap, wedged between his wide chest and the steering wheel. Their mouths met in almost frantic hunger, moving together in

deeply sensuous searching. The sound of the horn blasting the quiet woodland startled them both.

"The—the food," Anya stammered.

"I'm not hungry for food, love."

The husky sound of his deep voice swept away the last of Anya's purely instinctive female resistance.

"Time for us, Annie Anya. Come to my bed, love."

In the rear of the van was a bed already made up, with a pile of cushions and curtained back windows. A small bed, but big enough. It waited invitingly as the cool breeze lifted the curtains and swirled around her while Brady undressed her, then himself.

His eyes were deepest blue, his craggy face serious. "Are you *sure*, Anya? Do you want to give yourself to me?"

She wasn't sure of much, but she was sure of that. "I've already given myself to you," she whispered. "You just haven't taken me yet."

His mouth came down on hers fiercely, his hands burying themselves in her hair. "You'd better mean that," he muttered. "I want all of you, all for me. . . ."

Like flying. Like dancing. Like their bodies ignoring their dazed minds and communicating on a deeper level, demanding and giving, building pleasure on indescribable pleasure in perfect accord. They kissed breathlessly as the fountain of pleasures grew higher and higher, cried out together as it burst and spread rushing waves of ecstatic sensation over them both. Then, slowly emerging from the dream, Anya felt the weight of Brady's body ease away. She turned and looked at him, her green eyes glistening with tears.

"I f-feel like a fool," she said brokenly. "I never knew m-making love could be like this."

He kissed her throat. "And, God, it was wonderful! Don't ever leave me, Annie Anya."

She wouldn't; she knew that. She would never leave him as long as he wanted her with him. That would be the key—as long as he wanted her.

Later, having discovered and made use of the narrow shower, she dressed in one of Brady's shirts, sat with him and shared the sandwiches and wine. Rain splattered against the windows, wet leaves swirled past in gusts of wind.

"You were right," she said in vast contentment. "This is a very cozy place in wet weather."

"It's never been quite this cozy before," Brady said, pouring more wine. "I don't want to take you home, not tonight. Do I have to?"

She leaned back, curling into his encircling arm. "I'll stay," she added softly. "but I'll have to be back in time to open the shop in the morning."

Brady hugged her to him. "That will work out. I'm leaving Helen tomorrow and I'll be back Friday. I'll pick you up Friday at noon and bring you back Sunday night." He sounded perfectly confident, but his eyes were not quite so certain. "All right?"

Anya hesitated. She wanted to ask him where he was going and what he was going to do, and that was a horrible thing. How could she even think of something so possessive, so prying?

"What are we going to do from Friday until Sunday night?" she asked instead.

Smoothing back her hair, he looked down at her. "We're going to find out what you think of the way I spend half of my life," he said soberly. "We're going to the mountains."

On Wednesday, with the shop bulging with customers, Morgan called Anya from Atlanta.

"Anya!" The light voice, full of charming gaiety, brought Morgan's face

clear in Anya's memory. "Darling, I can't locate Brady in any of his usual haunts, and I wondered—can you tell me where he is?"

"Why, no. I—I haven't seen him recently, Morgan."

Morgan's voice took on a tinge of irritation. "Anya...there was a little—misunderstanding—about that music box he bought for me. I want to straighten it out. Is the box there, in your shop?" She added sweetly. "If it is, we won't even need Brady. I'll come over for it myself."

Anya was suffused with embarrassment. "No," she managed, "it isn't here, Morgan."

"Oh, hell," Morgan snapped, the sweetness gone. "Then I'll have to find him. If you see him, just tell him I'm ready to do what he wants." She hung up without waiting for an answer.

Anya went back to her customers, wondering if she should have told Morgan that the music box now belonged to another collector. Telling her would save Brady time and trouble, but Morgan would probably have hysterics.

Brady appeared at Postons' Art and Antiques Shop at precisely five minutes to twelve on Friday.

Outside, hurrying to keep up with Brady's long stride, Anya felt a burst of joyous freedom. She was breathless with his nearness.

"I missed you," he growled, tugging her close when they reached the van. "How could I miss you so much?"

Anya thought of the next two and a half days with a thrill of anticipation. Two and a half days of freedom with Brady. No Morgan, no tourists, no inquisitive probing from Marilee, no past and no future.

In the van Brady's hands gripped the wheel, his eyes swiveled to the road in

front of him. "We're going to go where no one can find us. I need a big dose of being alone with you. I'm tired of demands."

Demands. That made Anya think of Morgan and Morgan's instructions. *Tell him I'm ready to do what he wants.* She glanced at Brady's tense face and thought: the hell with it. All Morgan wanted was the Bruner box, and there was no way, now, that Brady could satisfy that demand. She would tell him later, when he was rested. She leaned back into the big bucket seat, relaxing.

"Time for us," she said softly, and saw his quick grin, his hand leave the wheel and come to clasp hers.

Just before dark, the mammoth van groaned and rumbled down a steep incline on the rapidly dimming trail and ended on a grassy plateau overlooking a shallow gorge and a rushing, rapids-filled river. Brady shut off the engine and sighed with satisfaction.

"We're lost," he announced. "Not another human being within miles. What do you think of it?"

"Stupendous," Anya said, awed. She opened the door and slipped out, shivering in the cool air. Faint stars appeared in the deepening eastern sky as she watched. She felt Brady's arms enclose her from behind.

"You realize, of course," he said in her ear, "that now I have you in my clutches."

She leaned back and flung her arms out melodramatically. "Take me, I'm yours."

Brady swept her up, cradling her to his chest. "That," he said, "is the best offer I've ever had."

Anya woke up alone in the small bed, her naked body warm under blankets that had been securely tucked around her. She blinked sleepily at the golden light pour-



ing in through a side window. She listened, but there was no sound of movement in the van. No Brady.

She glanced around and saw a thick robe draped across a stool, obviously put there for her use. He had put it there and left. But where had he gone?

Leaving the blankets in a tangled pile, Anya frantically grabbed the robe. Half stumbling, she ran through the van to the wide expanse of glass in the front and looked out, sagging in relief. There, near the edge of the gorge in the distance, was Brady. His back was toward the van, and as he moved slightly, Anya could see an easel and canvas in front of him.

Well, of course, he was painting. That was what he *did*. She turned back into the kitchenette, biting her lip. Granted, it was all new to her—this wilderness, the possibility of danger, and the impossibility of finding her own way back without him. But that was no excuse for being a coward. Which you are, she told herself sternly. The first minute alone, and panic. Still trembling, she went on to the narrow shower for a quick wash.

“Anya?”

She was pulling a sweater over her head, so her answer was muffled. But her smile was brilliant as her face emerged. When Brady bent and kissed her, she could feel the outdoor freshness on his skin.

Holding her, nuzzling her warm neck, Brady chuckled. “I intended to get back before you got up.” He raised his head and looked at her. “Lord, it was good to wake up here with you.” He grinned. “No phones, no TV, no people, and no way for you to leave. I’ve got you, love. You can’t run away.”

Anya laughed. “Don’t you know that if you tried to leave me here alone, you’d have to scrape me off?”

He stared at her. “Are you frightened

here, Anya?”

“Not when you’re around. But—well, when I can’t see you, it’s a bit scary.” She turned away from his too-penetrating gaze and glanced through the window. “I don’t know what’s out there, Brady.”

“Nothing nearly as dangerous as a human,” Brady told her. “You’re safer here than you would be in a city, Anya, and you may as well get used to it. We’ll be spending a lot of time in places like this.”

“In that case,” she said lightly, “I suppose I *will* get used to it. How do you like your eggs?” It seemed a good idea to change the subject before he found out just how cowardly she was. He seemed to be including her in his future, and she was suddenly aware of just how much she wanted that.

They spent an idyllic day, and night, but Anya had trouble shaking her fear. “You’ll be all right?” Leaving her the next morning to do some sketching, Brady was doubtful. Not, Anya was sure, because he thought she was in danger. Only because he didn’t want her to be frightened. “I’ll be back before noon.”

Anya smiled. “I’ll be all right. I’ve got a book to read.” She watched him disappear out of sight with only a faint trace of anxiety. The van was a fort, impregnable, and Brady would be back. Brady could handle any trouble he found.

The book didn’t hold her long, not with the perfect day outside and her new, strong wish to relate to Brady’s life. It wouldn’t hurt, she decided, to walk along the gorge as long she kept the van in sight.

She was coming back, moving easily when she heard voices. She turned. There, shooting out from behind the bend in the river, was a big whitewater raft. There were four bearded men riding it, heavy men, not young, but still strong-looking, and they were yelling, cursing obscenely,

and laughing. One of them looked up, caught sight of her, and shouted something unintelligible, his mouth like a cavern in his bearded face. Then they all looked up, laughing, and bent to their paddles again as the raft slid sideways. In minutes, they were out of sight, shooting down toward the unseen rapids.

Anya went on, thinking that of all the outdoor sports, that would be the last she would choose. Cold, wet, and hard work. She was stepping into the van when she saw Brady emerge hurriedly from the trees to the north.

"Your uninhabited wilderness was momentarily invaded," she said, wondering at his harried expression. "A raft full of men just went by."

"I saw them," he said grimly. "Did they see you?"

She nodded. "One waved a paddle. Why?"

"A rough bunch," Brady said curtly. "I wouldn't want them around."

Anya looked at him in surprise. "They couldn't stop if they wanted to; not here. Besides, they were just running the river—having fun, if you call that fun."

Brady started to speak and then shrugged. "Well, they're gone and we're leaving. We'll have to be on our way before dark to navigate that road leading into here. But first we'll walk south along the bluff as far as the portage around the rapids. I want to be sure that bunch made it."

"You mean they may need help?"

"I mean I want to be sure they're gone." For a moment, Brady's face was like iron, and then he laughed. "Don't mind me, love. I guess I'm jealous of invaders in a place I thought I had to myself."

Anya nodded. Brady had counted on privacy, and suddenly they weren't alone. But somehow she felt it was more than that.

They walked for an hour, with the booming of the unseen rapids growing louder. Finally, coming through a straggle of small trees, they found a sheer drop that went down to a sandy shore. Brady stood on the edge, staring down at the sand.

"They made it," he said. "There are fresh tracks and a scrape where they pulled the boat up. They may be miles from here by now." He looked relieved, his grin easy as he turned back.

"Let's go home," he said, and ruffled her hair. He kissed her, taking his time, leaving them both shaken. "Let's go," he said again, "so we'll have some time together before we have to leave." But when they got back to the van, they found that during the two hours they had been gone, the van had been searched, torn apart, turned inside out, ravaged. Even the food lay scattered in the sink and on the floor. Brady took one look and leaped outside, staring around at the empty clearing and then circling the van, his eyes on the ground.

White with shock, Anya repacked usable food into the refrigerator. Then she began on the rest, sorting through the clothes, putting the mattress back on the bed. She saw Brady returning, his long stride quick and angry, his face set in unfamiliar hard lines. Then, lifting the pillows from the floor, she looked down and gasped.

"Brady!"

He came in, looked at the gleaming .45 pistol on the floor, leaned over, and picked it up. Anya jerked away.

"It's mine, Anya. And it isn't loaded."

"Oh." She stared at the gun, confused. "Why didn't he take it? I thought thieves always took guns."

"I don't know," Brady said grimly, hefting the pistol thoughtfully. "Maybe they already had all the guns they wanted to carry."

Her legs trembling, Anya sank down on the edge of the bed. "You said *they*. Was there more than one?"

"There was more than one set of footprints," he said.

She knew what he was thinking. "That's impossible," she burst out. "They were gone, Brady. Down the river."

"Maybe," he said thoughtfully, "and maybe not. I should have followed along that portage trail. They could have stashed their boat there and come back here. Easy enough, hiking through the woods above us."

"But they couldn't have known we would leave the van."

"No," Brady conceded, grim again, "they couldn't. But it's probably a damned good thing we did." His eyes swept over her small figure worriedly. "Leave this mess, Anya. We're getting out of here."

She was full of frightened questions. "What did they want, Brady?"

The blue eyes went flat, evasive. "Who knows? As far as I can tell, nothing is missing. They didn't want money or my pistol. Maybe they just like tearing things up." He started the engine and turned toward the trail in the trees that would lead them out.

"What will you do? Go to the state police or a ranger station?"

"Neither," he said shortly. "I don't intend to report the incident."

Anya's eyes widened. "Why not? There could be fingerprints, other evidence. And they should be on the alert with those men around."

"No," Brady stared at the road, a muscle tightening along his jaw. "Forget it." He glanced at her somberly. "In fact, I'd rather you didn't mention it, either. Not to the Postons or anyone else. It's . . . not important." He looked away, and so did Anya, biting her lip.

"All right," she said finally, "I won't mention it. I won't even think about it." She sat back, curling her legs up, forcing a smile. "Why let it spoil the trip?"

His grim face softened for the first time since they had returned to the van. "I hope it hasn't scared you off. I want you to like my kind of life. In fact, I want you to love it."

Anya's hand curled tightly into his. "I like it. I'll see about loving it later."

Brady grinned, relaxing. "Fair enough. How about next weekend? Somewhere else?"

Anya laughed, withdrawing her hand from his and settling back with a tired sigh. "I'll go for that, providing it's definitely somewhere else. No more Raiders of the Lost Van, please."

The next day was cold and dark, a foretaste of winter. In Helen, the banners drooped, and the usually gay streets looked desolate in a fine, misty rain. But the few tourists who did venture out were in a hurry to find gifts and souvenirs before they left. Anya had a successful morning until the rain increased to heavy showers, but the shop was empty when a Mercedes pulled up in front, parking arrogantly in a No Parking area. Bundled in a hooded raincoat, Morgan Whitcomb climbed out and hurried in.

"Anya! How nice to see you again. Isn't this miserable weather?" Morgan was bright with charming friendliness. "What a lovely shop, darling. I had no idea—this is the first time I've seen it, you know. . . ."

Smiling, murmuring a greeting, Anya let Morgan chatter on.

"I've brought the full price for the music box with me," Morgan said. "In cash. Actually, you know, I thought Brady had paid the right price when he bought it. It had been so long since I ordered it that I really couldn't remember

what it was supposed to cost. You know how it is—I hardly ever think in terms of money."

Anya smiled. "It's too bad you've had so much trouble," she said diplomatically. "Since you mentioned it, why didn't you pick it up earlier?"

"I wasn't supposed to," Morgan said indignantly, and hesitated, her light eyes flickering. "That is, a—a friend of mine had promised to get it when it came in." She sighed. "Promises. Who keeps them these days?" Her gaze roved over the shop and lit on a shelf of music boxes. "Why, you have quite a few music boxes, don't you? Mind if I look them over?"

"Of course I don't mind," Anya said, following. "They're all for sale." She couldn't believe Morgan's eagerness, the way she pushed the boxes around, searching.

"Very nice," Morgan said flatly, turning away. She faced Anya, most of the pretense gone from her beautiful face. "Where is mine, Anya?"

"I don't know, Morgan."

"Brady took it," Morgan said, her voice low and angry. "Tore up Whit's check and just walked out with it. I know you know where it is."

"No, I don't," Anya said truthfully.

"Oh, come on." Morgan's friendliness had evaporated completely. "You and Brady are as thick as thieves. Tell me where it is."

"She doesn't have to tell you anything, Morgan."

Both women whirled toward the door. Brady had come in without a sound, and relief swept over Anya as she met his eyes. But Morgan was already talking, grasping Brady's rain jacket with a familiar air.

"Thank heaven you dropped in, darling. I've been trying to find you for a week to apologize."

"The box isn't here."

"But you said—" Morgan began.

Her mouth opened in surprise. Then, suddenly, her face glowed, a smile appearing. "Oh, Brady! I should have known you'd keep it for me until I came to my senses. You've been teaching me a lesson, haven't you? Here, I'll give you the money." She was half laughing, rummaging in her purse, when Brady spoke again.

"Don't bother. I'm—taking bids."

Anya stared. Hadn't he sold it? Or was he just torturing Morgan for reasons of his own? She looked at Morgan. Morgan's face was white, frightened.

"Brady," Morgan whispered, "this is more important than you think. I *have* to have that box. You don't know..." She stopped, staring up at him. "Or do you? Maybe you do, now. Maybe you want to drive *me* over a cliff, like Elisha."

Incredibly, Brady smiled. A tight-lipped smile without humor. "That won't work forever, Morgan. Take your cash and go home. Make your bid with the rest of them if you want the damned box."

The beautiful face was ugly with rage and some other, less definable emotion. Fear? "Damn you, Brady! I won't be the only one to suffer!" Morgan whirled, and was out into the pelting rain, sobbing with rage. In moments, her car went careening down the street.

Anya turned back from the window and looked at Brady. In that moment, he looked like a stranger. Then his blue eyes turned from ice to warmth.

"A nasty scene, love, but she won't bother you again." He moved toward her. Anya stepped back.

"Wait," she said through stiff lips. "I—need to know what this is about. Why didn't you tell Morgan you'd sold the box? It isn't like you to be cruel. And what did she mean about... about..." No, she couldn't ask that. What kind of a man was this whom she loved? She stiffened as she felt his hands touch her

shoulders, clasping them gently.

"I didn't sell it, Anya. And that's all I can tell you about that. But the rest of it I'll explain when we have the chance." His face was Brady's again, the wide mouth smiling and tender. "I wasn't being cruel, love. I only did what had to be done. Please believe me."

She wanted to. Oh, how she wanted to. But she understood nothing except that part about bids. It had sounded like *blackmail*, as if he were using Morgan's crazy need to own that box to force more money out of her. She looked away, her eyes hot and wet. "Why should I?"

"Because," he said softly, "you know I wouldn't lie to you." He drew her closer until their bodies touched and their faces were inches apart. "Because I love you."

"Well!" Marilee's bright, amused voice separated them with a jolt. "What an excellent occupation on a rainy day, you two. No customers to bother you." She was laughing as she took off her raincoat.

Brady's grin was easy. "Hi, Marilee. I'll get the car and pick you up here," he said to Anya. He was out and gone before she could answer.

"I'm going over to Dahlonga with him," Anya said, hastily answering the question she saw in Marilee's eyes. "He has a house there."

"Sounds as if you're getting serious, cuz." Sparrow-bright eyes ran over her. "You look it, too. All shook up."

Anya saw Brady pull up to the door. She grabbed her coat and ran, turning at the door. "See you tonight—sometime."

Slipping in the door held open by Brady's long arm, Anya settled into the softly padded leather. He reached for her, cupping her head between his palms, his mouth closing over hers. It was a kiss that first made her breathless, then sent her hands around his neck. A kiss that exorcised the demons of doubt.

"Now," Brady said huskily, "as I was saying before we were interrupted, I love you. Completely. Irrevocably."

"That's very nice of you," she said shakily. "It was lonely, being in love by myself."

Brady drew in a deep breath. "It's very nice to know you were. But you weren't by yourself. I knew the day we met you were all I had ever wanted. But—well, I still couldn't believe I deserved that kind of luck."

"How flattering." Anya's voice was muffled by his neck. "What changed your mind?" She pulled away from him, her eyes shining. "Why tell me now?"

Brady laughed abruptly. Starting the van, he swung out into the rainy street. "Believe it or not, it was something Morgan said—the first real favor she's ever done for me, and she'd be furious if she knew it." He glanced over at her with his face furrowed. "This isn't easy, love. I buried myself ten years ago, and I've just surfaced." He saw her face go pale and added gently, "I didn't drive Elisha over the cliff. She drove herself. Still, she did it because of me, and Morgan has never let me forget it. But today, when she brought it up again, I realized that all it meant to her now was a weapon to use against me. Knowing that made me free. I've done penance long enough. I'm going to live again."

Anya tried to speak calmly. "That's cruel, Brady. Losing a wife you loved would be grief enough, without being constantly blamed for it."

His rugged face swung to her in surprise. "Loved? I despised her, Anya. That was my guilt. She threatened to kill herself if I walked out on her, but I wouldn't listen. A week after I left, she took herself and her latest lover over a cliff. I felt as if I had killed them both."

Anya's mind was full of disconnected thoughts, mixed feelings. "And ever

since," she said, "you've been trying to make it up to Morgan."

"Of course," he said simply, "I had to do something. They were so close, as twins are. Morgan was hit hard. She asked me to help her get out of the wild gang the two of them had been running with, and I took it on—hoping to save *her*, at least. I found her a job, new friends—I even introduced her to Whit." He sighed. "Whit won't like me for that when he finds out. I'm sure she's back in—maybe she never really quit."

"Brady," Anya said helplessly, "back in what?"

"Back in what they call The Game," Brady said grimly. "Running drugs, hiding bombs, war games. . . ." He looked at her utterly shocked face and sighed. "I'd better start over. I met Elisha when I came home from the service, and her beauty bowled me over. We were married in a month. A week later, she took me along on a camping trip with her friends. I knew them slightly—members of well-to-do families, parasites mostly. But I couldn't believe what I saw." Silent, he seemed to be thinking back.

"You won't understand, Anya. These men live for the ultimate excitement, the ultimate risk. That camping trip included drugs, casual sex, and war games with live ammunition. One of their milder sports, I found out later. I had to force Elisha to leave, and the next time she went alone. She couldn't give it up, but she still wanted our conventional marriage to hide behind. That was their biggest thrill—moving in the best circles in the city, keeping their other lives hidden, and playing The Game."

Anya's skin crawled. "And you think Morgan is in it? Even now?"

"Either she's doing it, or they're doing her," Brady said bitterly. "One of their specialties is blackmail, and they know Whit isn't aware of her past."

"Good Lord! What kind of men are they?"

"Scum." Brady was dark, brooding. "You saw four of them, Anya. On the raft in the river."

She gasped. "They knew you were there," she said, thinking out loud. "They knew it was your van." She looked over at him searchingly. "What did they want, Brady? What were they looking for?"

He didn't look at her. "You're jumping to conclusions now. How could they know we were there? They would have searched any van they found, just for the hell of it." He reached over and took her hand again. "It could have been only a coincidence—a bad one. And this isn't the way I wanted to spend the afternoon. I've explained all I can. Now, let's forget it."

"Let's," she said at once. She was more than willing to put the whole, confusing, saddening story out of her mind. She wanted to remember only what Brady had said about love. Those words were engraved in gold.

Brady's house, built of mellowed cedar now darkened by the rain, was wide and many-windowed. It fit the setting, the effect heightened by the foundation of natural stone and the native plantings and trees around it.

"It looks," Anya said as they got out of the van, "as if it grew there all by itself. Natural and—and strong." Was that, too, like Brady? Or did he just have an artist's eye for what would suit the setting? She glanced at him and found him looking at her, not the house.

"Now for the inside," he said, smiling, "which I hope you'll find interesting. The tour," he added, wrapping an arm around her waist and starting her toward the stairs, "begins, naturally, in my bedroom. I hope you don't mind."

Shrugging out of her coat, Anya gave

him a glance from wickedly sparkling green eyes. "I don't mind at all," she said sweetly.

Several ecstasy-filled hours later, Brady showed Anya the rest of the house. Anya thought that he looked completely at home in the informal house. But there was more to the place than just his rough masculinity. There was also what was inside that rugged exterior: a feeling for color and balance in the neutral background; the shafts of light; the vivid paintings on the walls. Anya turned slowly, taking it in. "I love it," she said finally. "It's just like you. And I'm not surprised that you don't have the Bruner box on show. It wouldn't fit in, would it?"

His eyes flickered and moved away from hers. "Not in my house," he said shortly. "Now, if you'll step around this screen, you'll be in the dining room."

So, he doesn't want to see or talk about that unmusical music box. Anya impulsively challenged him.

"Brady, you're shutting me out. I mention the Bruner box, and all at once I find the door closed on me. Why are you making such a mystery of it? Why not let Morgan have it—or at least tell her what price you want?"

"Maybe I want revenge. In any case, I thought I had made it clear to you that I wouldn't discuss that damned toy." He caught her arm as she turned away angrily. "Drop it, dammit! It has nothing to do with us."

"It has something to do with *you*," she said tremulously. "Morgan threatened you."

Brady's face changed, lightening. "Is that what's worrying you, love?" He kissed her, light and tender. "Tell you what—if Morgan attacks, you can stop her when she hits me too hard. Fair enough?"

Anya had to laugh. Put like that, it did

sound ridiculous. "Fair enough. I'll protect you. But if I'm going to fight, I'll need food."

"Nothing simpler," he said, releasing her. "Make a salad while I start the charcoal for some steaks."

After dinner, Brady built a fire in the fireplace. They lounged on the couch and talked on the safest of all topics: their childhood, growing up, things they had done.

"You were a marine?" Genuine surprise colored her voice as she interrupted his tale. "That doesn't sound appropriate for an artist."

"I learned a lot," Brady said meditatively. "Chiefly, that I wasn't cut out to be a peacekeeper. Our unit was specially trained for that. We learned to be wary and quick to react."

Sprawling on top of her, he kissed her, beginning a gentle persuasion. "In some ways," he added smugly, "my reactions are still fast."

"Any faster," Anya muttered, "and we'd never make it out of bed." She wriggled into a more comfortable position and took a deep breath. "It's late, Brady."

He raised his head and smiled down at her. "This won't take long."

Anya could feel a glow, a rising heat from the center of her being. After all, she thought dreamily, it doesn't matter if I get home at one o'clock or two...

A loud knocking on the entrance door shattered the firelit silence, and Brady was on his feet, cursing loudly.

"No one knows we're here! So, who in hell is that?" Anya stared toward the door as Brady flipped on the outside light, and then flung open the door. A man was standing there, clearly delineated by the light.

"What in God's name..." Brady stepped out and shut the door. But Anya was certain that she knew who the visitor was



and why he was there. Even in that split second, she had recognized the expressionless face of the tall man who had wanted to buy the Bruner box.

When Brady came in long moments later, Anya was pulling on her gloves, her face averted. "I'd like to go home now," she said quietly. "It's late."

Brady nodded, his face grimly set. "Before we go, there's something I have to say," he said. He pulled her down on the couch and put an arm around her. "I'd like to put it off forever, but I can't. Will you try to understand?"

Anya looked at his somber face. If Brady was going to confess something she didn't want to hear, then—then she didn't want to hear it. She looked away. "You don't have to tell me anything—not now."

Brady smiled faintly. "Yes, I do. You know I love you, Anya. And I think you know that I want you in my life permanently."

"Maybe," she said weakly, "but I don't agree."

"You will," he said, pulling her closer. "But that's beside the point. The point is that I have to stop seeing you for a while."

Jolted, Anya stared at the fire, struggling with a feeling of disbelief and an insane desire to argue.

"All right," she said numbly, "if that's what you want."

"You know it's not what I want," he said gently. "It's the way it has to be. And that's not all. I want you to leave Helen. You've been talking about going to New York, and that's as good a place as any. I want you to go by tomorrow." He stood, pulling her up into his arms, holding her tightly. "Will you do it, love? Just go, without any questions? It's important to me."

She left stiff and awkward in his arms. She kept her face averted, her hands pressed to his chest. He had never been

more of a stranger than he was right now.

"I will," she said slowly. "I'm sure it's for the best." She looked up, seeing the strain in the blue eyes. "And I won't ask any questions."

"Ah, Anya..." He bent his head to kiss her, and she moved away quickly.

"Don't." Picking up her handbag, she refused to look at him; she knew he'd see the agony in her eyes. "It won't make it any easier, Brady. Let's go."

He was looking puzzled and hurt. "It isn't forever, Anya. Only long enough to clear up a problem and—"

"Tie up the loose ends," she finished for him, and forced a smile.

In the van, Brady went on with his plans for her. "Don't try to find anything permanent in New York, Anya. It won't be worthwhile. Send your address to Marilee when you're settled and I'll get it from her."

Watching his tense, stern face, Anya agreed to everything. She knew she wouldn't do as he said; he probably didn't expect her to. She was one extra complication in a complicated life, and one he could do without.

When they arrived at the Postons', Brady reached for her. "Maybe it doesn't make it easier," he said huskily, "but I can't leave without it."

His kiss was insistent, warmly possessive. Anya's unwilling mouth softened in spite of her; her stiff body melted and clung. She was weak and close to tears when she finally broke away and slid out of the van.

"Good luck," she said shakily, "in whatever it is you're trying to do. And good-bye."

"Not really good-bye, Annie Anya. It never will be," Brady said. "Wait. I nearly forgot..." Reaching into his pocket, Brady handed her a slip of paper. "If—well, in an emergency, call this number. They'll find me. And be careful,

love. I couldn't stand to lose you now."

She didn't trust herself to speak as she took the paper and shoved it deep into a pocket of her jeans. She gave him what she hoped was a cheerful nod, blinking back tears and ran into the house.

Arguing with Marilee that night wasn't easy. Anya couldn't explain. All she could do was repeat, "Brady and I are in agreement—I should leave."

"Then you're both crazy," Marilee said finally. "If I've ever seen two people in love..."

"Oh, *please!*"

Marilee's mouth closed with a snap. "Well," she said crossly, "if you can stay until noon tomorrow, it will give me a chance to hire someone else."

"I can do that," Anya assented tiredly. She owed Marilee, and staying one more morning with the twins wouldn't kill her.

In the morning, Anya was hollow-eyed with exhaustion. She hadn't slept at all, only wrestled with a rebellious heart.

By ten-thirty, her bags were packed and she was ready to leave. Betty Sue had taken the twins and dogs for a walk. Now Anya could hear them returning, making cheerful sounds in their various ways. Then the sound of a diesel jolted her heart. She stared from the window until the top of a van appeared. White, rusty, with a sign on the side that read: KROGER'S PLUMBING CO. She turned away as the truck pulled up and stopped.

"Annie Anya?" Betty Sue called from downstairs.

"Yes?"

"The men from Kroger's Plumbing are here to fix the furnace. Shall I let them in?"

"What's wrong with the furnace?"

"Nothing. They say Mr. Poston just wants it cleaned out good and checked

before hard winter sets in."

"Oh. Well, of course, let them in." Anya sighed and promised herself not to think of Brady...

Downstairs, Betty Sue screamed, then was silenced by a rough command.

"Knock that off!"

For an instant, Anya was paralyzed. Then she was scrambling for the stairs, stopping halfway down and staring at a horrifying tableau. A man in the hall was pointing a pistol at Betty Sue; behind Betty Sue was a motionless mass of blond curls and quivering brown-and-white fur—the twins and the beagles.

The man looked up at her and motioned with the pistol. Anya forced her feet down steps until she reached the bottom. The man wore khaki clothes, was overweight and had a belligerent-looking face.

Anya started violently when another man appeared, coming from the back of the house. He was carrying a large black gun with strapped bullets hanging from it. It looked murderous. The man looked murderous. Like a coiled snake, dark and slim, with eyes as flat and black as his gun. He stared back at her calmly.

"You are Brady Durant's woman?" His voice was soft, the rhythm clearly foreign.

Reality burst forth in Anya's mind. *They liked hostages.* And she had told Betty Sue to let them in.

"Yes, I am Brady Durant's woman." She said it firmly, even with a kind of relief. If they wanted her, perhaps they would let the others go. "What do you want?"

The man's thin lips stretched meaninglessly. "At the moment, patience." He ran lightly up the stairs. Anya heard doors open and close and knew he was searching the place. She waited, listening.

"There is no danger in the house, Harry." The dark man's rhythmic words

were the only sound he made coming down the stairs. The heavy man relaxed and grinned, turning to the door.

"My partner wants to be in on this," he said. "Hold the fort." His voice was clearly American.

The slim man looked at Anya, stretching his lips again. "Send your maid and her charges upstairs. Small children annoy me."

Betty Sue didn't wait to be told. She whirled and grasped the dogs, picking them up, shooing the twins ahead of her. Anya could hear Betty Sue frantically shushing them, and then the sound of a door closing. She turned back to the dark man and the utter chill of his eyes.

"My name is Haman," he said abruptly. "I will tell you what to do. If you obey and we get what we want, no one will be hurt."

They all said that, and it meant nothing. She had seen enough on TV to know. It was part of the game.

A sound in the hall brought Anya's head around. A large man, and a blond woman in black jeans and fur-lined leather jacket. *Morgan*. A smiling Morgan, swinging toward her gaily.

"Anya, darling! My friend Harry and I decided to join in. Brady's little revenge backfired, didn't it? He went too far. . ."

"Silence," Haman commanded. "Why waste time? Now that we're all present, we can begin." He motioned to Anya. "The telephone in the hall, Mrs. Meredith. You will use it to call Brady Durant, and I will tell you what to say."

Anya stole a glance at the clock. In minutes both Roger and Marilee would be driving up. There might be a chance then to get the children out.

"It's no use," she said shakily. "Brady and I have—have parted. We quarreled. He will feel no obligation to me."

Morgan laughed. "That's an outright lie," she said contemptuously. "Brady is

crazy about her, Haman. Like I said, this woman is the highest bid you can make."

Anya's head snapped around. The highest bid! It was that damnable music box they wanted!

At that moment the Postons pulled into the driveway.

"You know what to do," Harry said to Morgan. Morgan nodded, and ran out. Anya saw Morgan rush toward Roger and Marilee and begin talking in an agitated manner, her small hands gesturing wildly.

Anya turned away. The dawning horror in Roger's and Marilee's face was harder to bear than her own deep fear.

Morgan came back in triumphantly. "They will stay in a car, where you can see them, Haman, and make no attempt to get help." She flung herself into a chair and beamed. "They bought our story, too. We are innocent hostages—caught here while visiting Anya," she chuckled. "They think I'm very brave to return to the house out of loyalty to you."

Haman swung toward her. "What story is this? You and Harry asked for the honor of assisting me!"

"We are assisting," Morgan said pertly. "Didn't you just see me doing my part? Be fair, Haman. We're with you all the way, but we aren't making a career of this. You said you would leave no incriminating witnesses, didn't you? When this is over, we intend to be solid citizens again."

Anya was very still, her eyes fixed in space, her thoughts fixed on one, incontrovertible fact. No incriminating witnesses. She was one, and so was Betty Sue. They might not even spare the children. *The children*.

Haman's gaze went to Morgan. "Mrs. Whitcomb, go upstairs and escort the maid and the children from the house. It is true that we need only this woman."

"Not me!" Morgan's voice rose and

cracked. "She never saw me! Send Harry."

Harry was looking hard at Haman, his heavy face full of suspicion. "She's right, you know," he said slowly. "That maid could cause us trouble." He got up, his heavy body suddenly menacing. "I don't like it at all."

Haman smiled. "Perhaps it is not necessary that you like it. You have become considerably less helpful since you decided to be a hostage." Haman's gun now pointed at Harry's bulging waistline. Harry sat down abruptly.

"Well," he said, his red face losing color, "I'm not going up there, either. No use giving that maid another chance to look me over."

"Then I will do you a favor," Haman said smoothly. "I will make your new role more convincing." He held out his hand, the narrow palm up.

"Now, wait a minute," Harry blustered, "that's going too far. . . His voice trailed into silence. In a moment, he reached into a pocket and laid his gun in Haman's hand. "You're being a fool," he added weakly. "You may need me yet."

"I need no untrustworthy cowards," Haman said, pocketing the gun. "You and your playmate have achieved your goal. You are both hostages." His gaze swept over Morgan sardonically. "It would be wise to remember that you are no longer necessary in my plan."

Then Haman turned back to Anya. "You may bring down your hostages, Mrs. Meredith, and let them go."

She turned and ran, her long legs shaky. She found them in a huddle in a back room.

"Your mommy and daddy are here," she said to the twins, "and they want you to come out to the car. Right now." She nodded at Betty Sue, agonized with fearful hope. "You are going, too. Bring the

dogs." She paused. "Tell Mr. Poston that if Mr. Durant comes here, he must warn him. The man downstairs is a professional killer. Can you remember that?"

"Yes," Betty Sue whispered numbly. "It's—it's what I thought."

The twins huddled halfway down the stairs, their heads down, waiting. They had seen Haman leaning against the open doorway, holding his gun. Anya could get none of them, even Betty Sue, to go any farther. She stepped away from them and stood in the doorway of the living room.

"Haman, if you will move over here with me—"

He looked at her incredulously, but he moved, quick and silent, then watched as they all fled through the door. Then he went to close and lock it. "Now," he said, turning back to Anya, "we'll call Mr. Durant."

"With a heavy heart, Anya rummaged through her purse and found the card Brady had given her, then followed Haman to the phone.

While Anya dialed, Haman brought the phone to her ear, placing his head against hers so that they could both hear. Anya steeled herself against the stomach-wrenching revulsion that came close to choking her. The woman answering on the other end of the line was cool and efficient.

"Name, please."

"Anya Meredith."

"Who are you calling?"

"Brady Durant."

"If you leave your number, he will call you back."

Looking down, Anya read the number from the Poston phone and then listened as the woman repeated it. "That's it," she said, relieved, and heard the other phone click down. She drew away as Haman replaced the one they had been using.

"You did well," he said. "You said nothing to cause suspicion. However, the clerk gave no indication of when the call would be made."

"Perhaps she doesn't know." She jumped, startled, as the telephone rang.

Haman's hand shot past her and picked up the phone. "Yes, she is here." He put his palm over the mouthpiece and gave instructions.

"You will say where you are. You will say it is necessary that he bring the music box here. You will also say that if he comes alone there will be no trouble, but if he brings the police many will die." The black eyes fixed on hers. "All will die. In spite of your efforts, the car will be no protection for the others."

"And should I mention the Poston family? Brady is fond of them and he wouldn't want them harmed," Anya said.

Haman smiled. "An excellent thought. Mention the children. But nothing more, Mrs. Meredith."

She nodded and took the phone, swallowing. "Brady?"

The tense "yes" in his deep voice rocked her heart. One of the last words she would ever hear him say?

"I am at the Poston home. You must bring the music box here. If you come alone there will be no trouble, but if you bring police many will die. The Postons are outside with the twins. They are in a car—which is no protection. I trust you." Then, because it was the last chance and because she loved him, she went on without hesitation. "One man with an Uzi."

Haman slapped her, hard, across the mouth, knocking the telephone from her hand, sending her toppling over backward. He grabbed the telephone and spoke into it harshly. "She will be the first to die if you don't obey." He slammed the phone down and jerked Anya to her feet.

"I should kill you now! You could have

done nothing worse than to give away my lack of strength!" He slapped her again. Then he pushed her in front of him into the living room and threw her into a chair. Harry and Morgan stared at her numbly.

Harry cleared his throat and looked at Haman. "What did she do?"

"She warned him," Haman said bitterly. "She told him there was only one armed man."

"You can fix that," Harry said eagerly. "Give me back my pistol."

Haman turned, sneering. "And have you shoot me in the back to prove yourself a hero?" He stood glaring at Harry's purpling face, at Morgan huddled in her chair. "Leave," he said, suddenly vicious. "Leave while I'm fool enough to let you live."

They were on their feet, moving rapidly toward the door. "We won't say anything to anyone," Harry was saying earnestly. "We'll wait at the camp with the others. This is all a mistake, Haman."

"Yes," Haman said, following them. "Mine. I mistook you for a man."

Anya would now be alone in the house with Haman. As he came back into the room, she looked at him curiously.

"They may inform the police."

"They won't dare," Haman said contemptuously. "You are still alive to testify against them." He stood looking down at her, nervously fingering the trigger of the gun. "When will this man Durant arrive?"

"I don't know." She saw the quick anger, and added, "I can only tell you he will be here as quickly as he can."

It was, according to the living room clock, a little less than two hours. They both heard the noise of an approaching vehicle as a Jeep drove up the incline.

The door opened and Brady got out, his tall figure erect. He stopped midway up the walk. "I want to see Anya Meredith," he called, "now."

Haman grabbed Anya and thrust her against the glass, putting his gun in plain view beside her.

Brady's rock-hard face wore a look of agony as he stared at Anya, and then tightened again. Slowly, he removed his jacket and tossed it on the grass. He raised his arms, showing as the shirt stretched across his powerful torso that he was hiding no weapon. Then, turning around, he pulled out all his pockets and left them dangling, spreading his empty hands.

"He is very efficient," Haman said approvingly. "Very careful." He raised his voice. "Where is the Bruner box?"

Brady moved closer. "In the Jeep. The Jeep is full of gas and running. Leave the woman there and come out. No one will interfere."

Haman laughed. "Do you take me for a fool? Get the box out, open it! Stand there, ready to hand it to me. I will bring the woman to you."

And past you, Anya thought dully. In to the Jeep. And, somewhere along the way back into the forest, when Haman was sure no cordon of police waited, that would be the end of it. Brady had moved even closer to the window, and she searched his face hungrily, wishing she could see his eyes clearly. Wishing she could tell him once more that she loved him. Tell him to be careful. Then he was nodding, turning back to the Jeep.

"He's going to do it," Haman muttered. "What else can he do? A sensible man." He dragged Anya from the window. "Come," he said, "we are going out."

When the door was unlocked and they stepped outside, Brady was standing beside the walk with the music box glittering in his hand. She could see his hair blowing in the breeze; she could see with a trembling satisfaction that the Postons' car was empty, the doors on the far side open. Brady had known what she meant,

and he had warned them. They would have slipped out and over the slope of the ravine. She could only hope that Haman would keep his eyes on Brady.

"Walk slowly," Haman whispered. "Move only when the gun pushes you."

His hand reached out and touched her shoulder, bringing her to a stop as they came abreast of Brady. The barrel of the Uzi dug into her back.

"I wish to hear it, Mr. Durant. I must be sure it isn't a clever copy."

Brady raised his left hand and turned the carved rose, dropping the hand again and extending his right arm, holding the box closer to Haman so he could hear the tinny tinkle.

Facing forward, Anya could now see nothing of Brady but his left side, the strong, muscled leg, the dangling hand. Which was moving. Moving very slowly, imperceptibly aiming at a point between Haman and her, where a gun barrel pressed against her back. She wanted to scream. Then, suddenly, she knew Brady could do it. With a tiny bit of luck...

"Ah, yes," Haman said softly behind her, "you have not tried to fool me. It is the trade, at last." Anya felt the pressure of the gun ease slightly as Haman reached for the box, saw Brady's slow moving hand blur into speed, and she flung herself forward on the brick walk, hearing the ear-splitting roar as the Uzi exploded into action, spitting its sure death harmlessly into an open sky. She rolled, scrambling away from the struggling men, seeing Brady's powerful arm high in the air, his big hand wrapped around the thin dark fingers and stuttering gun, his strength lifting Haman clear of the ground. Then Brady's fist smashed into the dark face and Haman dropped, scrambling frantically in the grass beside the walk. Anya gasped as she saw him grab the fallen silver box and, crouching, run for the Jeep. Jumping in, he roared away.

Numbly, Anya sat up, raising her eyes to Brady towering over her. He hefted the gun, tossed it aside, and sat down on the walk with her, gathering her into his arms.

"I've been criminally stupid," he said bitterly. "Can you ever forgive me?"

"That should be easy," Anya quavered. "You just saved my life." Then she burst into tears, into gulping sobs she couldn't stop. Feeling his arms tight around her, she knew she was alive, loved, saved. But the sobs kept coming, in spite of what seemed an enormous crowd of people coming up, circling, making comforting sounds.

"Let her cry," Brady said. "She's been through hell." He picked her up and carried her into the house and up the stairs. Marilee followed, pale and shaken.

"I'll stay with her," she said. "There's a man downstairs who says he's a friend of yours. He—he came running out of the woods with a rifle."

"Tell him to wait," Brady said. "I'm staying with Anya."

An hour later, he brought her downstairs, pale but with a luminous smile. Anya winced when she saw the tall, expressionless man waiting with Roger and Marilee. She never wanted to think of the Bruner box again.

"I feel fine," she said in answer to Marilee's murmured question, "except I'm starving."

"that can wait," Marilee said heartlessly, "until I find out what's been going on. That—that terrorist got away scot-free, and no one has even called the police."

Brady looked at the poker-faced stranger. "Either you tell them or I will. They won't talk, and they deserve to know." He sat down on the couch, pulling Anya with him. "This is Tom Galway, of the CIA. He's had the box ever since I took it away from Morgan."

In the shocked silence, Marilee spoke indignantly. "Well, he doesn't have it

now. That crook has it. It ought to be reported—"

"We want him to have it," Galway said. "Let me give it to you fast. A month from now, Haman will lead a group of renegade survivalists in an attack on a main transportation center in the United States. We know the place, we know the hour, and we will be waiting. It's our chance to capture and convict them all." He paused, enjoying the shocked attention. "They will be following instructions contained in the music box."

"But there was nothing in the box," Anya said wonderingly. "It had a secret compartment, but it was empty."

Galway flushed. "It was hard to find. When Durant brought the box to us, intending to sell it, we asked him to help. He agreed to wait a few days while we found the message and decoded it, then sell it to Mr. Whitcomb. Believe me, we took that box apart—looking for microfilm, microdots, anything. We found nothing. Yet we knew it was there, so we kept looking. Durant was forced into the position of withholding the box, and that brought on this trouble today. Thank God, we found and decoded the message finally, as it all worked out. But—well, it could have been tragic except for Durant. I'm extremely sorry, Mrs. Meredith."

"Well," Marilee demanded, "where was the message?"

Galway shook his head. "In the music. One of our men finally decided it was too bad to be real and tested it. Recorded and slowed down, it's a detailed plan. Chanted, by the way, in a Muslim language. They call it an Irade, an order that must be obeyed. Some ancient superstition the top terrorists have turned to their own purposes."

"Chopin would have hated it," Anya said. "It was awful."

"But useful," Galway answered, "as you'll see next month in the national



news." He stood up and reached for his long coat. "I don't need to tell you, of course that this must be kept quiet..."

"You certainly don't," Marilee said firmly. "Even I can keep my mouth shut when there's a good reason."

"We're leaving, too," Brady said. "Any more talk can wait. Anya's exhausted."

"And hungry," Marilee said quickly. "Stay for dinner."

"We'll have dinner in Dahlonga," Brady answered, and headed for the hall. "I'll bring down your bags, love."

Anya smiled at Marilee and shrugged. "He stuck me in the shower, and when I came out my bags were all packed. I guess I'm moving, after all."

A single low light burned in Brady's bedroom. It's warm, golden glow seemed very like the feeling Anya had inside.

"Brady?"

His arm tightened around her. "Hm?"

"I'm not a coward."

He turned toward her, his grin a flash in the dim light. "I never thought you were."

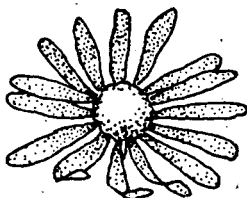
"I did. I feel better about myself, knowing I can be brave when it's necessary."

"If I start feeling better about you," he murmured, "you won't get any sleep." They had made gentle, tender love when they had first gotten into bed, but she wasn't surprised by his quickening body. She moved closer.

"I can sleep tomorrow."

"Ah, darling..." He pressed against her. "How I do love you. Are you going to marry me, Annie Anya?"

"Of course," she said. "Haven't I told you I'm a very brave woman?" ♥



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# *Hard Drivin' Man*

*Handsome trucking king Jarett Carson is buying up all small truckers in the region. Only Sabrina Darling, keeping her parents' small firm going after their fatal accident, is holding out. Can she withstand his ruthless ways and passionate kisses?*

NANCY CARLSON

Sabrina's high-heeled boots clicked against the wood floor as she paced. Hair the color of fire, a hand's width past her shoulders, swayed, and her golden eyes scorched a path to the blinking light of the telephone. The man himself was on hold.

A humorless smile touched her sensitively curved mouth. So far, all their correspondence had been conducted through other members of his company or lawyers, but now—now he had called

personally, and she had him cooling his heels on the other end of the line. "Let him wait," she muttered to herself. He deserved to wait. He was determined to add her trucking firm to his empire, and she was just as determined not to yield.

The business was all she and her sister had left. Their parents had been killed a year ago in an automobile accident, and Sabrina had no intention of letting what their parents had worked for all their lives

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slip into the hands of a conglomerate magnate.

She knew of several small trucking firms he had recently acquired. Every time one of those companies had bid on a contract, Jarett Carson, president and owner of C.I.T. Inc., had undercut its price. Then, as soon as the business showed signs of failing, the man would swoop in, claiming his prize like a predatory eagle. He'd been using the same tactics on her, but so far she'd managed to survive. But surviving was about all she could manage.

She moved to the small window in her dispatch office, rested slim fingers on wood paneling that buckled at the corner of the frame, and peered through dust-covered panes. The morning sunshine of southern California beat against the cabs of five trucks lined up in a neat row. Chrome that should have reflected the bright rays was dim, rust spots marring the finish. They were old trucks but operable. They should be on runs, the tires burning the pavement, but the only contracts she'd been able to land lately were small local runs. Her work load had virtually been cut in half, along with the number of employees on her payroll. All because of one man.

She spun from the window, her frail features tight, and sank into a brown leather desk chair, soft from years of use. The caller had waited long enough, she decided, and anchored a mass of red-gold hair behind her ear. Her features a mask of cool composure, she adjusted the receiver to a comfortable position, then punched the button.

"You wish to speak to me, Mr. Carson?"

"This is Sabrina Darling?"

"Yes, this is Miss Darling," she answered, her voice a mockery of sweetness.

"I'm calling about your company."

She cringed at the silky smoothness of his tone. "I'm not interested in selling."

"Why do you insist on this battle? You'll only hurt yourself in the long run."

There was a flutter in the pit of her stomach, warning her that he was right. Already she'd taken out a loan, posting the business as collateral. The interest payments were becoming more and more difficult to make, but her determination still dominated.

"I told you, my business isn't for sale."

There was a curse on the other end of the line, and she pulled the receiver away from her ear, her golden eyes shooting daggers at it. Slowly she lowered it into its cradle, a derisive curl to her lips as she wondered how many times the man had had someone hang up on him.

Trying to find something else to concentrate on, she picked up her mail from the incoming box on her desk and her attention was caught by a colorful advertisement featuring a sparkling black rig. Truck Races—Fifty Thousand Dollar Purse. She studied the fine print at the bottom of the page. The prize for first place was thirty thousand, plus more for lap counts. The time trials would be held tomorrow, Friday, and the race on Saturday. It wasn't too late to enter.

She flipped the leaflet over, scanning the application on the back. At the bottom of the page there was a list of names of would-be drivers. One in particular blazed up at her—Jarett Carson. She had never been tempted to race before, but the sight of that name issued a silent, irresistible challenge, beckoning her to pit her skills against his. For her, the race would be like a double-edged sword. To win would bring in desperately needed revenue, plus she'd have the satisfaction of running Jarett Carson into the ground.

Friday morning Sabrina studied the oval-shaped track where the round-y-round race would take place—four lanes,

a dirt center with patches of worn lawn, a wall on the outer edge topped with wire fencing. At one end of the track rose the empty bleachers for the more than eight thousand spectators expected to gather the next day. The pit section was nearby.

After her inspection of the track she went to the booth set up for truckers to pay their entrance fees and qualify and then to her truck.

She was one of the last to make a run. Everything went smoothly. Her time was excellent, meaning she'd be near the front of the pack when the actual race began. She returned the truck to the pit section to familiarize herself with the surroundings and get a better feel for what would happen the next day.

When she swung herself down from her light-blue Kenworth, she caught sight of the black rig that had been featured in the advertisement. It was sheltered away from prying eyes, in a corner of the pit section. And it was beautiful even from a distance. Drawn, she walked across the deserted pit section to get a better look. Every gadget on the market adorned its classic lines, and a green shirt and cowboy hat had been draped over the polished hood.

A string of oaths drew her gaze downward. She leaned over.

"You need some help?"

"Could be," a deep, decidedly masculine voice drawled in response.

She straightened when it became obvious he was going to slither his way from under the truck into the late-morning sunshine. First she saw faded Levis stretching across muscled thighs, followed by lean hips, then a slim waist encased in a wide belt with a large brass buckle in the shape of a rig. He wore no shirt, and fine black hairs curled around the belt buckle, traveling in a dare-to-touch-me path up his naked middle until they formed a triangle on his tanned chest. She

wondered if his shoulders were as broad as she imagined. . . . They were. The next instant she was the recipient of an infectious smile set in hard, tanned features. About thirty years of life experiences were visible in the lines on his face. She could see stubbornness in the cut of his jaw, but black curls caressing his forehead and the carved line of his cheekbone softened the effect, and she suspected the abandoned cowboy hat was worn to keep the wayward mass in place. Her gaze settled on magnificent black eyes, which were tinged with lazy contentment as they drank in Sabrina's body.

"Lady," he drawled, "you sure fill out a pair of jeans nice—real nice." He pulled a denim-clad leg up to his chest, the muscles in his thigh flexing against the faded patch of blue.

Not half as nice as you, she thought. "You a mechanic?"

He wiped grease-stained hands on his jeans. "Sometimes. You know anything about trucks?"

"Some. You want me to take a look?"

Pearly-white teeth flashed. "I can hardly wait."

The small sentence said far more than "yes." Meeting his eyes, she knew he was as attracted as she, and a wealth of understanding passed between them.

She had no trouble sliding beneath the rig, accompanied by the stranger. The undercarriage was as well taken care of as the body, but she saw nothing that needed attention.

She relaxed against the pavement, her hair fanning in disarray, and cast a puzzled glance at the man lying inches from her. He had his head propped on one hand, watching her.

"Do you have any idea where the problem is?" she asked.

"Hmm. I sure do." Smile lines crinkled, and she knew he wasn't referring to the truck. He continued. "How about

lunch? Then dinner... and then breakfast?"

The suggestive lift of brows left her with no doubt that between dinner and breakfast she was to spend the night. At twenty-two she'd been the recipient of propositions before, but never had it been done with such warm humor and lazy self-assurance. Nor had she ever before been tempted to accept. Her lashes flickered. She wanted to see this man again. She'd just have to lay down some ground rules.

"Lunch," Sabrina answered. Then, more softly, she added, "only." The one small word said it all, she thought. "What's the problem with the truck?"

"I was checking to make sure everything is secure." He pointed with a grease-stained finger. "My hand's too big to reach that nut, and the undercarriage gets in the way of the wrench."

She cast an amused glance in his direction. "A mighty big problem. By the sounds you were making I expected at least a brake job."

"Could you handle a brake job?"

She looked back at the undercarriage, shoving her hand through the small opening and grasping the nut between two fingers, "I can handle this nut." Then she was smiling into black eyes that hadn't left her body. Neither the lazy tilt to his mouth nor the flicker of his incredibly long lashes could dissolve her feeling that this man possessed a will of steel.

"Hey, Jacy, what you got there?"

Startled, she turned her head toward the sound. A man in his late forties balanced a crouched frame on one foot, his arms dangling over one knee.

The man she now knew as "Jacy" answered the question. "The prettiest mechanic you've ever seen."

"From here it looks like the prettiest anything I've ever seen. Aren't you going to introduce us?"

Jacy gently placed a finger against his mouth. "All right, Dan." Although Jacy spoke to Dan, his eyes rested on Sabrina. "Sugar, that man lurking out there, spying on us, is Dan Durby." He glanced back at a grinning Dan. "You had an introduction. Now get lost."

The men were good friends. That much was obvious to Sabrina. The next thing she heard was the thud of Dan's footsteps fading as he obeyed his friend's order, leaving her alone with Jacy once again.

"Is there anything else you can't reach that you'd like checked?" she asked.

He pointed out several more areas. After she had completed her tasks she started to slide from under the rig, but was stopped by a strong arm being draped across her waist. She glanced at him through the heavy veil of her lashes, hoping they would hide the fevered excitement his touch had stirred.

"Are you going to tell me I'm moving too fast if I kiss you?"

Her breath quickened. At the moment she could think of nothing more pleasant, but at the back of her mind was the nagging thought that she didn't know him.

He didn't wait for her consent, but drew her into his arms, pinning her hands against his golden torso.

She felt powerless to deny what he sought, and her lips parted, seeking the pleasures he promised. The kiss deepened, shattering her resolve to behave with a semblance of propriety. She wanted to hold him, to circle him with her arms, to let her hands explore the planes of his back. Her imprisoned fingers stroked his chest, conveying the passion that obsessed her.

He broke the kiss and shifting his body, reached for a large, folded quilt. He lifted her head from the ground and stuffed the quilt under it, and Sabrina was relieved. He hadn't stopped because he'd had enough.

"Now, where were we?" Supported by one arm, he brushed fiery strands of hair away from her face and ran a finger across her mouth, making her lower lip quiver. "Are you frightened of me?" he asked.

"No." She shook her head. "Fascinated' would be a better description."

He lowered his head again, his lips touching hers. Unable to help herself, her arms crept around his neck, responding to the hunger he stirred. His tongue parted her lips, seeking the warmth of her mouth. One intoxicating kiss after another mastered her thoughts, and her body yielded seeking the comfort of his embrace.

His fingers trailed across the swell of her breasts, dipping beneath the edge of her skimpy top to meet the delicate lace of her bra.

He moaned softly, then buried his head in her neck, his lips scorching a path to her ear. His hand crossed the final barrier, slipping into the cup of her bra to embrace one full breast. "Don't be angry with me, honey. I can't help it."

Her breath caught in her throat as a delicious warmth spread through her. Then she raised her body slightly, her eyes never leaving his, and eased the top over her head. She was remotely aware of Jacy's sudden intake of breath as she removed her bra and lay bare for the touch of his eyes as well as his hands. He traced one full breast, his fingers a velvet caress as they circled a rose-topped peak, bringing her to full arousal. "You're beautiful," he murmured. "There should be a law against covering such a body."

He ran an exploring hand down her naked side and over her denim-clad hips until his hand rested on her leg, where his fingers gripped the muscle. "I bet your legs are as lovely as the rest of you, but I'm not going to find out. We're about to have company. I just caught a glimpse of a car

pulling into the lot."

A deep flush heated her cheeks at the thought of being found in her present state. Frantically she groped for her clothes and with steady hands and a tender touch he helped her into them. Finishing his task, he smoothed her hair away from her burning face, then, as if he couldn't help himself, pulled her back into the security of his arms.

"What are you doing? Someone is coming. I can hear footsteps."

"Shh, sweetheart. There's nothing wrong with a man's hugging his girl, and you are my girl. All mine."

He gave her a possessive squeeze, and spoke reassuringly into her ear.

"You're uptight. I can feel it in your body. Come on, we'll go have that lunch I promised you."

Sabrina, Jacy by her side, slithered from under the truck. Scanning the pit section, she saw several men entering the far section, brooms and other cleaning gear in their hands. Out of her peripheral vision she saw Jacy take his shirt from the hood of the truck. He easily slipped it on, letting it hang loosely while he picked up the hat, pinching the crown. He was tall, an inch or so above six feet, and towered over her five-foot four-inch frame.

With one hand he swept his black curls away from his face, anchored the hat in place, then gave the brim an added tug, pulling it low over his forehead. "Ready?" he asked softly.

She answered the tenderness she read in his voice and expression by moving forward and slowly buttoning his shirt. "Almost." Her traveling hand came to an abrupt halt at his pocket. Two initials, J.C., were stitched there in the same green that trimmed the shirt. A tremor ran through her, her mind rejecting the obvious. Slowly, she traced the initials and said, "Your name? It's Jacy. Right?" She held her breath, waiting for his reply.

"My initials," he corrected. "All my friends call me J.C."

The blood slowly drained from her face. "Your name," she said in a raspy voice, her gaze fixed on the small pocket. "What is it?"

"Jarett. Jarett Carson."

Her heart sank as her worst fears were realized. How could she have lain in his arms, her body begging for his slightest touch, her mind oblivious to anything but him... His brows creased, meeting in a frown. "Honey, what's wrong?" He reached out to brush her face, but Sabrina slapped at his hand.

"Don't touch me," she snapped. "Don't ever touch me again."

He yanked his hand away as if it had been burned. "What the hell kind of game are you playing? One minute the seductress, the next a—"

"D. and D. Transport," she hissed.

A shutter fell across his face, blocking all emotions from view. "What do you know about D. and D. Transport?"

"Everything. I own it."

There was the stinging hiss of his breath being inhaled, then, "Sabrina Darling."

Facing him as well as her emotions was too much, and she turned to leave, but was stopped by a hand clamping around her arm. "Let go of me," she demanded.

His fingers bit into the soft flesh as he spun her to face him. "What would Sabrina Darling be doing at the raceway?"

She jerked her head toward her own battered truck. "I think it's rather obvious, or are you just being obtuse?"

His gaze slowly scanned the truck in the distance before coming back to rest on her. "You don't really think you can out-drive the men?"

"I happen to be a good driver." Her head tilted at a proud angle, matching his arrogant stance.

"Oh, lady," he drawled. "I can think

of one thing you'd be good at, and racing's not it."

"You're vulgar!" she exclaimed, her face flushing.

"That's not what you would have said five minutes ago." His eyes burned with a look that could have melted steel. "Five minutes ago I held a woman in my arms. Where is she, Sabrina?"

"Gone."

"And what's taken her place?"

"A woman who won't let you take advantage of her."

"No. What's left is a blind idiot who thinks a pile of junk, and her novice driving, can outdo a professional."

His words stung, and she winced. "I might not own a rig that's freshly painted and has sparkling chrome, but I have one with a good engine, and I'm good."

He lowered his head until his mouth was inches from hers. "You could kill yourself out there. Is that what you want?"

"No. I'll be all right. I'm telling you I'm a good driver."

"Are you? I wonder. Do you drive as well as you kiss, Sabrina?"

"Yes!" she answered quickly; then, having second thoughts, changed her reply. "I mean, no." She bit her lower lip. How could she answer such a question? The arching of his brows framed black glittering stones. She couldn't put a name to the emotion in those dark eyes. Instead she spun on her heel and marched across the pit, vowing to forget that he had ever held her in his arms.

The next day Sabrina stood in her pit section dressed in white pants and a green-and-white-striped tube top. She clenched her shaking hands and concentrated on short, even breaths, trying to tame her jumping nerves. For the first time in her life she was experiencing the true meaning of the word fear.



Trying to find something to concentrate on other than the race, her eyes swept the other contestants. She caught a glimpse of Jarett, and her gaze narrowed as she followed his strong, long strides. His clothes were similar to those he'd worn the previous day—cowboy hat, jeans, and short-sleeved shirt, only this time it was blue. She watched him climb into his rig:

"You trying to get rid of the competition, Sabrina?"

She turned to the speaker. It was Larry—one of her drivers, lean and good-looking in a Nordic sense—smiling at her, his brown eyes twinkling.

"I sure wouldn't want to be the guy on the receiving end of that look you were giving."

She had to ignore his observation. An explanation was impossible. "The truck ready?" She smiled.

"Yep."

Sabrina glanced back at Jarett. He pulled away from his section of the pit and took his place in line, a red helmet replacing his hat. The crowd cheered. She hoisted herself into her seat, the knot in her stomach tightening. She closed the door and secured her helmet. There was a round of "good luck" from her four-man pit crew as she shifted into gear and eased her truck onto the raceway. Her name filtered over the speaker system.

"Yes, sir, ladies and gentlemen. Here she is, Sabrina Darling, our only woman contestant, and she qualified with an amazing time, falling just short of Jarett Carson. There she is, easing her way into line just behind Jarett—Jarett had better keep an eye on Miss Darling. The bachelor of the circuit is liable to find himself with a woman he can't handle."

A roar of laughter sprang from the crowd, and Sabrina cringed, wiping moistened hands on her pants. Adding to her jitters were eight thousand spec-

tators. A sudden hush fell over the grandstands when the last trucker took his place.

The drivers had fifty laps to prove their skill. The engines of the rigs accelerated to a loud roar as the drivers awaited the signal to see which one of them would prove to be the champion of the day. When the green flag fell, her fear vanished. She was aware only of the challenge that faced her.

Wheels spun, gripping the pavement. Trucks blocked her on both sides, forcing her to hold her position behind Jarett. He gained speed, and she followed; until the truck to her left missed a gear at a curve and fell back. Sabrina seized her opportunity, pulling into the free lane; shifting to gain speed, but Jarett made the same move. They raced at a parallel, each gaining, then losing. Lap after lap he held the lead, with her only a few feet behind. Then he pulled forward, weaving in and out of rigs. He was good, Sabrina couldn't deny that. She fell back, switched lanes, and drew ahead of Jarett, clearly displaying her own driving skills. She managed to hold her power. And then he was knocking on her back door, and she realized he'd deliberately fallen back and was riding her draft. When they neared the finish line she was running full out, but Jarett was able to accelerate and win the race by inches.

She felt more frustrated than if she had lost by laps, but still she breathed a sigh of relief. It was over, and she could relax. She had come in second place after all, and that meant ten thousand dollar, nothing to sniff at. She pulled into her pit section and watched Jarett as he made a final sweep of the track, holding the black-and-white-checkered flag, the spectators applauding.

She opened the door to her rig and stood on the highest step. Her crew was elated over her second-place win,

shouting their congratulations as she swung herself to the ground.

She removed her helmet, her hair cascading down her back and her lips curled in a faint smile when the announcer named the winners of the race, asking them to come to the podium set up before the grandstands to accept their trophies. The money would be awarded at a special banquet that evening.

On the platform were racing officials, microphones, and the winners of the race. Several minutes passed before Jarrett, as first place winner, appeared next to her on the platform. His helmet had been replaced with the cowboy hat, and he looked much like the same man she'd made love with the previous day. Sabrina was angry. Falling into her draft was devious even if it was legal, and she put it on a par with the way he did business.

The silence stretched between them. Jarrett obviously was waiting for her to make a move to congratulate him, but her stubborn pride prevented her from doing what he expected.

The announcer filled in the awkward moment. "Well, Jarrett, what do you think of Miss Darling?"

The lines in Jarrett's tanned features deepened. He didn't go to the microphone to answer the question, but with one finger pushed the cowboy hat to the back of his head and reached out to touch her, but she stepped back.

Not to be put off, he followed and grasped her chin. When she tried to pull free, his hold tightened, making protest painful. He studied her intently, turning her head one way then the other, each move exaggerated, giving the impression he'd never seen her before but definitely liked what he saw.

"What do you think you're doing?" she whispered angrily.

He ignored her question, yanked her to him, and slid his arms around her. Her

hands were pinned to his chest. "Let me go!" she mouthed.

"Why, sugar," he replied, his voice low enough to prevent the curious onlookers from hearing. "I'm the winner, and winners get kisses of congratulations." His mouth closed over hers, smothering any objections she might have made. Then he bent, scooping a shocked Sabrina into his arms. Cradling her against his chest he headed for the stairs, but was stopped by the announcer.

"Jarrett, you...ah...forgot your trophy."

The wicked grin that spread across his face made Sabrina more apprehensive than ever. "No, I didn't, Bill. I've got my trophy." He hugged her tightly to him, stressing his point, then left the stage.

Hoots and hollers followed them as Jarrett carried her along. He finally deposited her at the rear of his trailer, away from the crowds and the noise and pressed her intimately to him, the contours of his body molding to her softer ones.

She threw her head back in defiance. "Damn you! Let me go!"

"Ah, honey, I don't want to fight. I want to make love."

She could hardly believe her ears. He was driving her out of business, had won the race, had insulted her driving ability, had humiliated her in front of eight thousand people, and now he had the audacity to suggest that they make love and forget about what a scoundrel he was. She answered him with a swift kick to the shin, spun out of his reach, and headed for her own pit section.

Later, struggling with the large trophy the racing officials had finally presented her, Sabrina hastened up the cement path leading to the front door of her ground-floor apartment. Balancing her burden on one hip she inserted the key in the lock

and pushed. Then, shifting the trophy once again, she stepped into her living room.

Sabrina loved her apartment. Though not lavish, it was cozy and definitely felt like home. In front of the couch below the picture window was a glass-top wicker coffee table, on which she had placed the most recent issue of *American Truckers' Magazine* and a thriving begonia. Directly opposite the door was a counter that faced the adjoining kitchen, where a formica dinette held the bowl of fruit she'd arranged that morning.

Now she froze at the sight of her younger sister, whom she hadn't seen for a year, sitting at the counter. Cynthia's shoulder-length golden hair had been styled in a pageboy, waves brushing against her forehead, soft curls swinging beneath the delicate line of her chin. The linen suit hugging her shapely figure matched her blue eyes, while sheer nylon stockings gave her long legs a golden cast. A white suitcase placed near the stool served as a footrest. Sabrina quickly scanned the room for her brother-in-law. He was nowhere in sight.

"Aren't you going to say anything?" Her sister's eyes widened with the question, her long, darkened lashes fluttering.

"Cynthia," Sabrina murmured.

"By your reaction I take in you're not happy to see me."

"Of course I am." She set her purse and trophy on the chair, then hugged her sister in a warm greeting. "I was just so shocked. Imagine my surprise, walking into my apartment and finding you. How long can you stay? And Brian? Where's he?"

Cynthia didn't answer for a moment. Sabrina's gaze slid over her sister. She looked as if she'd just stepped out of a magazine. Not a hair out of place, but on the verge of tears. "What's wrong, Cynthia?"

"Brian wants me to get a job. Can you imagine? Me, of all people, working. I might just leave him."

Sabrina wasn't surprised by this news. Cynthia had been cosseted and babied all her life by adoring parents and, unlike Sabrina, had wallowed in the attention.

Sabrina had been a tomboy, independent and aggressive. She had insisted on learning the business and enjoyed the challenge of driving the large rigs.

But Cynthia had learned all the feminine things, showing no interest in business matters, and when Brian had appeared on the scene, she had been swept off her feet. He was in college, studying to be a lawyer, handsome, every girl's dream, and had eyes for no one but Cynthia. By the age of eighteen she was married.

After their parents' death Cynthia had inherited half of the company. It was natural for her to remain a silent partner, leaving Sabrina in charge, and the first year everything had worked out fine. There had been a steady flow of profits. That, plus Brian's part-time job in a law office, would have provided the newlyweds with everything they needed. But with Jarett's pressure, that had stopped. It was impossible for Brian to do any more than he already was doing, and he had obviously turned to his wife.

Sabrina tried to choose her words with care. "Don't you think it would be better to find a job than to leave Brian?"

"Sabrina," Cynthia's voice caught on the last syllable. "I can't. I'm not qualified." She shifted on the barstool, then said in a hoarse whisper, "Don't you think it would be a good idea to sell the business to that Jarett Carson? I never did understand why you were so stubborn about not selling." A tear trickled down her cheek. "It would be an answer, Sabrina. Then I wouldn't have to work."

Sabrina shook her head. "We can't,

Cyn. Mom and Dad spent their entire lives building that business. It meant everything to them, and it's all we have left that was a part of them. I wouldn't sell Jarrett Carson a peanut. Not even for a thousand dollars. Besides, he won the truck race."

"What truck race?" Cynthia pulled a handkerchief from her purse and wiped delicately at her eyes, brimming with tears.

"The race today. I placed second, Jarrett Carson won. He actually rode my draft. Blast him!" In her anger she hit the counter with her hand. "Can you believe that? My draft? Of all the unscrupulous—"

"What's a draft?"

Sabrina's anger dissolved. Her sister was puzzled; but then, anyone unfamiliar with racing would be, and it wasn't fair to take her ill humor out on Cynthia. "It's not important. I won ten thousand dollars, but I have to pay my men, and there are other bills that have to be taken care of. But I think I can squeeze a thousand out for you." Her sister's brightened features encouraged her to go on, and Sabrina lied in an effort to encourage her sister's morale. "As a matter of fact I was thinking of hitting the racing circuit. It's an easy way to make money."

"Sabrina, that sounds splendid. Positively splendid. I had no idea." Cynthia wrinkled her nose with distaste. "But it's so unfeminine driving those big things. How can you stand it? You get so dirty."

"A little dirt never hurt anyone, Cynthia." She changed the subject. "Did you bring a party dress? There's a banquet tonight for all the drivers. It should be a lot of fun, and it'll take your mind off your troubles."

Cynthia eyes suddenly sparkled with excitement. "I brought the most adorable Grecian number. It covers, but it's so slinky everyone notices."

"Sounds great. Why don't we get you settled in and get dressed? Or have you already made the grand tour and figured which of the two bedrooms is yours?"

"My room's the one with the twin beds and yours is the one with that marvelous-looking water bed. Right?"

Sabrina nodded with a smile and Cynthia picked up her suitcase and headed for her room. Sabrina followed down the narrow hall to her own, thinking of the money Cynthia spent. Her clothes, the air fare there. No wonder they were broke. Maybe if she tried to budget... She'd discuss that possibility with her later.

Cynthia smiled over her shoulder at her sister. "How much did Jarrett Carson win in that race?"

"Close to thirty-five thousand."

Cynthia whistled as she disappeared into the guest room. Then Sabrina heard her muffled voice through the door. "Thirty-five thousand. Imagine that."

A short while later Sabrina studied her reflection in the full-length mirror hanging on her closet door. A sleeveless, floor-length, sapphire silk gown draped gracefully over her figure, the slight fullness to the skirt swirling about her ankles. The neckline swept across her shoulders and dipped to a deep vee in the back, exposing the softness of her skin.

She'd coiled her hair to one side, leaving a slight fullness around her face, a spray of curls touching her skin. Now she secured pearl-drop earrings into place. Their lustrous finish reflected the blue hue of her dress.

Satisfied with her appearance she picked up a matching velvet jacket piped in gold, along with a small beaded bag from the bed and left the room. As she closed the door, the one opposite hers opened.

Cynthia stood in the doorway, dressed in an exotic red dress that stole Sabrina's breath.

"Cynthia, next to you I'm going to feel

like a pauper."

Cynthia giggled. "Isn't it sensational?" She ran a critical eye over Sabrina. "Take my word, Sabrina. No one will think you a pauper. Where did you get that dress? I never realized what a beautiful figure you have. Strange, isn't it? I've known you all my—"

Sabrina smiled. Cynthia was feeling better. The incessant chatter was a definite sign.

When the two young women later entered the lobby of the Manhattan Hotel, Sabrina's mouth curved into an instant smile at the sound of the commotion. They made their way towards it, and on the threshold of the huge banquet room, Sabrina stopped and scanned the crowd for someone she knew. Half way across the floor she saw Larry and several of the truckers, and they walked over to join them at a large table. They had been seated only a few minutes when Sabrina looked across the room again and stiffened as she met Jarett's unflinching gaze. He sat on a wooden chair, balancing on the two rear legs, one hand clasped on the hard back of the empty chair next to him. The black satin lapels of his black tuxedo jacket framed a white ruffled shirt. The shirt would have looked feminine on any other man, but it somehow intensified Jarett's hard, lean features.

"Who is he?" Cynthia asked, following her gaze.

"Jarett Carson."

Cynthia gasped. "I swear, Sabrina, you left out the most interesting fact—he's positively handsome. What a dream! I always did like the rugged, he-man type. I get goose bumps just looking at him."

Conversation flowed easily around the large table until Sabrina felt hands resting on the back of her chair, fingers brushing her skin. She didn't have to feel any more than that accidental touch to know who

was standing behind her.

"Hello, Sabrina."

She turned her head far enough to catch his eyes. "Jarett," she acknowledged, holding herself rigid.

Cynthia said, "Don't you think you should introduce us, Sabrina?"

Sabrina shot Cynthia a glare that went unnoticed. Her whole attention was on Jarett.

"I'm Jarett Carson," he said. "And I bet you're the silent half of D. and D. Transport."

"How'd you know who I was?"

"Your resemblance to Sabrina is remarkable. The only major difference is the color of your hair. But I was somehow under the impression you lived in Florida with a husband."

"I do, but..." Her thumb slid over her wedding band, twisting it. "My husband and I have separated, and I decided to come out and stay with Sabrina for a while."

Sabrina choked as the lie slid from Cynthia's mouth. She turned a narrowed gaze on Cynthia, who was pushing a golden wave away from her eye, looking sweet and innocent.

"What are you trying to do?" Sabrina snapped in a husky whisper. "You're married."

"Leave me alone, Sabrina, I don't want to hear any of your... whatever it is you're trying to lecture me on. I just want to have a good time. I'm tired of worrying."

Meanwhile, Jarett pulled up a chair, indicating he wanted to place it between Cynthia and her. Sabrina didn't move. There was no way she was going to let him feel welcome. But Cynthia giggled and slid her chair over, making it easier for him to squeeze the chair in.

"How nice. I was hoping you'd join us."

Jarett smiled, acknowledging

Cynthia's comment, then took his seat and leaned close to Sabrina. "I suppose I'm going to have to be satisfied with only fifty percent of D. and D. being glad to see me, hmm? Too bad your sister isn't in charge of the business. I have the feeling she'd see things my way."

"Cynthia isn't interested in business matters, so undoubtedly you're right in your assumption." She turned her head away, but Jarett leaned over and whispered in her ear.

"How long is it going to take, Sabrina? How long before I get you into bed?"

She flashed amber eyes at him, ready to give him a piece of her mind, but was jolted by the sight of her sister's hand tapping his. Cynthia's voice filtered through the air. Sabrina didn't know what her sister said, but whatever it was, it had drawn his attention. Jarett was no longer interested in her. Cynthia's hand remained at his cuff, her fingers lightly brushing his hand. For the first time in her life Sabrina hated her sister.

She turned to Larry, seated on her other side, and forced herself to laugh at something he said. The sound rang hollow to her own ears, but no one else seemed to notice. Inside Sabrina seethed. She'd rather have been the target for Jarett's temper than to have to sit and watch while her sister wove a web of entrapment.

By the time the announcer made the presentations her head was throbbing, and any joy she'd felt over receiving the money had vanished. She rubbed her temples in an effort to ease the shooting pain in her head.

"Are you all right, Sabrina?"

Her eyes danced with fire. How could he have done all the things he had, including flirting with her sister, and then play a solicitous role?

"Actually, I've got a headache." She looked around Jarett to Cynthia. "I think

we'd better go home, Cynthia."

Cynthia chewed at her lower lip. "Oh, Sabrina., I'd so like to stay. I have so little time in California." She smiled at Jarett, looking like a pathetic victim of her sister's headache. "Do you think you could drive me home Jarett?"

Sabrina burned with impotent fury.

"I think you should drive your sister, Cynthia," Jarett answered. "If she's not feeling well, she shouldn't be driving."

His answer surprised Sabrina. She'd thought he would jump at the chance to be alone with Cynthia.

"I can drive Sabrina," Larry put in. "I should be leaving anyway. I've got an early run in the morning."

Sabrina smiled at him and pushed back her chair, picking up her jacket and small purse. Larry took the jacket from her and draped it across her shoulders. Unable to resist, she glanced at Jarett. He stared at Larry, the skin taut across his cheekbones. Briefly, Jarett's eyes met hers, but she could read nothing in their depths.

"I'll see Cynthia home," he said, his voice flat.

After Larry dropped her at her apartment, Sabrina took two aspirin, then stripped and changed into a short white satin nightgown. Then she tried to sleep. But after a restless hour, she flung back the covers, wrapped a floor-length satin robe around her and headed for the kitchen.

She'd no sooner sat down at the table with a glass of milk in front of her when she heard a car pulling up. Soon she heard the car door slam and voices approaching. Just then the phone rang and as Sabrina walked to the counter to answer it, she heard the key turn in the lock.

"Oh, Brian, how nice to hear your voice," she told her brother-in-law. "I'll get Cynthia." She turned and saw Cynthia and Jarett clasped in each other's



arms, standing in the entry hall. Her stomach ached with a sudden spasm. Mustering all the courage she could, she called out, "Cynthia, the phone is for you, it's Brian," surprised at how natural her voice sounded.

Cynthia spun out of Jarett's arms, a deep flush on her cheeks. "I don't want to talk to him." She took a step towards Sabrina. "No... wait, I'll take the call." She walked into the kitchen and stood at the counter, her back turned to her sister.

Jarett also moved into the kitchen. As Sabrina passed him on the way to her room, he reached out and grasped her arm, his fingers slipping a little on the satin before they established a painfully firm grip. He whirled her around to face him.

"So, where's Larry?" he grated.

She tried to pull away, but to no avail. His hold tightened, if anything. "He's not here."

While one of his hands held her captive, the other touched the neckline of her robe, dipping beneath the edge. She gasped at the intimate touch and tried to pull free, but his hold was firm.

Unsatisfied, his fingers rapidly descended, stroking as they headed for the swell of her breasts.

Her free hand pound in fury against the wall of his chest.

"You little hellcat." He halted the intimate exploration and held her firmly with both hands, then jerked her to him.

She felt like a rag doll with no control. Finding her voice, she hissed. "Damn you. Don't touch me. I'm not some pet you can stroke at your leisure."

"What about yesterday, under the truck? You weren't indifferent, honey, and don't give me any nonsense about not knowing who I was. We had something electric, and you damned well know it."

It was useless to try to deny the chemistry of yesterday. All she could do

was fight for today. "Yesterday isn't today. My attraction for *you* has passed." She heard his sharp intake of breath and knew she had hit her mark.

"Damn you," he muttered as he released her, then stalked out the door, slamming it behind him.

When Cynthia hung up the phone and asked where he was, Sabrina retreated into her room without answering. After a while she fell into a restless sleep.

The following morning Sabrina and Cynthia sniped endlessly at each other, until in desperation Sabrina took off on her own and spent the day at the beach. She returned to an empty apartment, where a note from her sister stated baldly that for the balance of her visit she would stay with a friend.

Monday morning Sabrina went to work as usual. Before going into her private office, she glanced at Paddy, her manager, sitting behind the cluttered desk.

"Any calls?" she asked him.

Paddy nodded and gravely handed her three phone messages. As she scanned the first one she could feel the blood slowly drain from her face. The day didn't promise to be smooth at all. Anxiously, she fanned the messages in her hand, checking them all with one brief glance. All three were from old, reliable accounts—canceling.

"Did they give any explanations?" she asked him.

"Someone called with cheaper bids."

Bids. Her mind pounced on the one word. There weren't any bids on these accounts. They were all customers who had done business with D. and D. Transport for so many years, they never got bids. They trusted her, and rightfully so. She gave them good, dependable service and had never taken advantage of them. She'd always given them her best shot. The nag-



ging thought of Jarett entered her mind. If her suspicion was right, someone was feeding him information from within her company, so that he knew how low to bid. The thought sickened her.

She sat at her desk and dialed the first customer, questioning his reasons for canceling. C.I.T., as she had feared, had sought him out, giving such a low bid it would have been bad business to refuse.

She followed through with the other two accounts, knowing the answers before she even dialed yet needing the confirmation.

Jarett must have planted a spy in the company. She pounded her fist against the table in frustration. Livid, all she wanted to do was confront the man responsible. She picked up her yellow clutch bag from the desk, withdrew her keys, and snapped the purse closed. Her high-heeled yellow sandals clicked in an angry staccato as her steps carried her across the deserted yard to her white Firebird. She jerked it into gear and in less than ten minutes she was swinging into the busy yard of C.I.T.

Parking in front of the highrise building housing Jarett's business offices, she stormed in, instinct guiding her to the private elevator marked Penthouse. As it ascended, Sabrina had a chance to catch her breath. When the door opened, she swept past the startled receptionist and made for the heavy oak door with Jarett's name on it. She swung it open, oblivious of the outraged voice calling her to stop. Ahead, four men in business suits turned to stare. But it was Jarett, in a bright red shirt, untamed black curls cascading onto his forehead, who held her gaze.

"Why don't you all go down to the cafeteria and have a cup of coffee. She won't be staying long," he told his visitors.

As the last one departed, Sabrina was alone with Jarett. His eyes were cold.

"What's so important that you can't be announced like everyone else? Or do you always barge in, interrupting private meetings?"

"Only when I'm being driven to the poorhouse," she countered.

"You're feeling the pressure and came to negotiate?" he asked.

"No!"

"Then we have nothing to discuss."

She spread her hands against his desk and leaned forward. "Call off the dogs, Jarett."

"Why? Give me one good reason, Sabrina." He turned his back to her, gazing out the window at the ocean.

She circled his desk, closing the distance that separated them. When she reached his side he surprised her by reaching out to touch her face. She slapped his hand, and flared at him, "You stole three accounts this morning through a planted spy and then have the nerve to try and touch me. You're really remarkable, Jarett. That much I can say for you."

He flashed her a look of disgust. "I don't need a spy to tell me what's happening in your company. As you discharge your men, I hire them. Loyalty transfers with the signature on the paycheck. You've been in business long enough to know that."

Maybe he hadn't been as underhanded as she'd thought, but that still didn't change the facts of that morning. "And what about those accounts you stole? You're losing money. I know. I called and they told me what they're paying. That was a horrible thing to do and took someone less than human to accomplish it."

"No, Sabrina, that wasn't horrible," he hurled back. "What's horrible is a woman who torments a man even in his sleep. All I really want to do is make love to you, Sabrina. Can't you understand

that? You belong to me."

"I belong to you least of all, Jarett. There's nothing I find appealing about you. Nothing." The stiffness of her body defied him to call her a liar.

Unable to think, she stormed out of his office; hurrying to her car, she wished she had the strength to tear the building apart brick by brick, along with its owner.

Late that afternoon, in her apartment, Sabrina sunk into a steamy bath. She was embarrassed about her behavior in Jarett's office, and was determined to relax. But the ringing of the phone shattered her reverie, and she gave up her bath. Wrapping a towel around herself, she padded down the hall to pick up the receiver. "Hello?"

"How about if your favorite driver takes you to dinner?"

She hesitated, not recognizing the voice. "Who is this?" she finally asked.

"That sure shows where I stand. It's Larry. I want to talk about my last run. Can we have dinner? There's a new restaurant I'd like to try. Let's put on our glad rags and make a night of it."

Larry had been on the road too long, she thought. He needed to unwind as much as she.

"All right," she agreed. "I don't see why we can't have fun while discussing business."

After arranging a time, she hung up and hurried to her room to dress.

The restaurant Larry took her to was attractive, with a stone front and a high-pitched shingled roof. Tall, willowy trees towered above masses of less distinct, lower foliage, and soft lights enhanced their lushness.

They walked to the entrance in a companionable silence. Larry's hand rested at the small of her back as he escorted her through massive wood doors studded

with brass nail. A waitress led them to a booth near the dance floor, where a band played.

Larry ordered drinks, then started their conversation by telling her the truck had broken down on his return trip, delaying his arrival by three hours. It needed work. Major work. From there he elaborated, finally closing with, "My last run had so many problems, Sabrina, I felt I had to make you aware of them before hitting the road again."

He wasn't telling her anything she didn't know. She had been trying to save money, but if Larry, one of her best drivers, was upset, her other employees must be too. She'd have to spend some money on maintenance, she thought worriedly.

"We'll get the truck fixed," she said.

Larry looked relieved and began to tell her of his first driving experience, when he'd been a boy of ten.

Sabrina was laughing as she pictured the small boy, when she suddenly caught sight of Jarett across the room. He was sitting alone in a booth, his arms stretched across the back cushion, staring at her. A minute later she saw her sister walk in and slide into the booth, joining Jarett. Her heart twisted painfully. It was hard to make conversation after that, and her appetite was gone. She tried not to watch them, but she knew Larry had noticed her distress.

But the music, soft and mellow, soothed her, and when he urged her to dance, she agreed. He led her to the floor and took her in his arms. Dancing with him was effortless. She tilted her head, looking at him. "Truckers aren't supposed to know their way around the dance floor."

He laughed. "My father said the sure way to capture a woman's heart was to know how to dance, and they'd fall like flies. I learned to dance the next day."

Sabrina smiled at Larry, while her heart

cried. She knew he wanted company, but in spite of herself, the conversation was forced. Finally, she made an excuse about being tired, and Larry suggested they leave.

At her apartment door, Larry leaned against its frame, looking at her.

"Thank you," was all she could find to say.

He lifted her head with a finger, then surprised her by brushing his lips across hers. "You're a fantastic woman, Sabrina. I wonder if that Jarrett Carson realizes how lucky he is."

She could feel herself flush. "You're wrong about us, Larry. Nothing's going on."

He shook his head. "The chemistry between you two is thick enough to cut with a knife." Without further words he was gone.

As Sabrina fumbled for her key, Jarrett stepped from the shadows, and took her bag from her. "Not much of a gentleman, your friend," he said, opening her door.

"Where's Cynthia?" Sabrina snapped.

"I took her back to her friend's house. Your sister is like a bad case of chicken pox, something you want to get rid of but hangs on and—"

"You were certainly afraid you were going to catch the contagious disease, weren't you?" she scoffed, interrupting him. "There wasn't as much as a thread separating you all evening." She tried to slam the door in his face but met with resistance. Her breath caught in her throat as he entered, slamming the door.

"And what about you and Larry?" he flung out. His angry eyes traveled over her face, hitting every feature, scorching in their intensity.

"You're mine, Sabrina, and the sooner you learn it the better." His lips possessed hers with bruising strength. Sensing that her fury was melting, he slowly loosened his grip and led her to the couch. They sat

down, and he embraced her again, his kisses soft and, seductive.

But Sabrina summoned her resistance. "You're not going to come in here and make love to me after you've just come from her. Now, get out." The words took all her strength, but she meant each one.

He cupped her face, forcing her to look at him. She had the feeling he was debating with himself. "I didn't even kiss her, Sabrina. As a matter of fact, my manners were poorer than Larry's. I was in such a mad rush to get here I didn't even walk her to the door."

Her shell cracked. She could feel tears stinging the backs of her eyes. "You're trying to ruin the business my parents worked so hard to build. I hate everything about you. Can't you get that through your head?"

His lashes flickered, hiding any emotion she might have been able to read. "Show me, Sabrina. Show me how much you hate me."

She was drowning, everything washing over her, pulling her into a whirlpool. Then her arms inched around his neck, her body yielding.

His tongue teased the corner of her mouth until she turned her head in an effort to fulfill what the licking promised. He didn't deny her. His tongue probed, savoring, then his hand brushed her breast, teasing until she quivered. His lips left hers to nuzzle the sensitive hollow beneath her ear. Meeting no further resistance, he picked her up and started for the bedroom. He flicked on the light and smiled. "Am I in the wrong room, or does my girl own a water bed?"

"It's the right room." Her lips brushed his neck with her answer. Unable to resist, she took advantage of his closeness and ran a cluster of kisses across his throat.

He laid her carefully on one side of the bed, and the water rippled, giving with her weight. "Everything about you is sen-

suous, even your bed. No wonder I'm going crazy."

She wanted him. She'd hate herself in the morning, but she couldn't face reality, not now. One night, she told herself. One night stolen from time. Nothing existed except them. As she watched him undress, she automatically reached up and started unfastening her buttons, but was stopped by strong hands pulling hers away. "I want to do that," he said.

He removed her dress then began to strip her down to her undergarments, a lacy bra and bikini pants the only barriers between the meeting of their bodies. His gaze seared her as he slid the straps of her bra from her shoulders, unfastened the clasp with trembling fingers and tossed the small garment aside then slipped her underpants over her hips and down her legs, letting them drop. Groaning, he stretched out next to her, pulling her into his arms, his mouth finding hers, sealing their heated passion. Her fingers wound into his hair, pulling, yet caressing while his hands roamed over her body, discovering the curves that had been driving him mad. He cupped one breast, his thumb running an erotic circle over its peak. Then, he pressed her to him, one hand cupping her hip, while the other stroked her back. With a slow movement he started to obey the silent command of her body. She tensed at the first feel of him, and he stopped.

She responded by holding him closer. She reached, seeking pain's pleasure. The contact seared and she clung to him, biting her lower lip, as she slowly crested a frenzied storm where stars burst, fusing in a kaleidoscope of color. Then she floated out of time and drifted, fighting the return to reality.

When she opened her eyes she was cradled against Jarett. He kissed her tenderly. "May wonders never cease. A virgin."

She swallowed, not knowing what to say. He was smiling down at her, the grin that creased his features threatening to split his face if it widened any further.

"You know, Sabrina, I really am a chauvinist. I like being the only man to have made love to you."

"I can tell," she replied weakly. "You look like the rooster who just raided the hen house."

"Poor Larry," he drawled.

"Jarett? If we're going to talk, do you think you could make it about something other than Larry?"

He grinned. "Your...ah...*shocking* condition, Larry, and sex are the three most interesting subjects I can think of. Except maybe your water bed. People are right. Making love on a water bed is better."

His flippant words hurt. For her the world had stopped spinning, and it was the man, not the bed.

"I love that scent you're wearing," he continued. "It keeps me drunk even when you're not around. Did you know that? I just keep thinking of you." He kissed her and quickly her pain was forgotten.

Later, curled beneath the covers, Jarett nuzzled her ear. "You're mine, aren't you, Sabrina?"

Her mind cried, "I'm yours in heart, body, and soul," but to let him know would rob her of the only protection she had. Her lashes flickered, hiding the answer she knew he'd be able to read. Why did he have to insist on truths?

Her fingers tunneled into his hair. "For tonight, Jarett, I'm yours." She hoped the compromise would satisfy him.

He said nothing, but his body tensed, and her heart twisted. She was afraid he'd leave.

"One night," he murmured. "You're mine for one night and then...damn you to hell, Sabrina." Each emphatic word caused her to wince. "Is this my punish-

ment, Sabrina? Take me to heaven, then drop me into hell?"

"No," she choked. "It's *my* punishment."

"I can't figure you, but right now it makes no difference. I couldn't leave this bed if I had to."

It was a long time before they fell into an exhausted sleep.

The following morning a shrill cry woke Sabrina. Her eyes fluttered open, and Cynthia floated into the line of her vision. She tried to move, but Jarett's leg pinned her to the mattress. Then in one swift movement he sat up.

"You've got lousy timing, Cynthia," he grated: "Leave!"

Cynthia quivered but remained rooted, her gaze fixed on the couple in bed. "It was Sabrina all along, wasn't it?"

Jarett threw his hands up in exasperation. "For heaven's sake, Cynthia, this is no time for conversation. Are you going to get out on your own right now so we can get dressed, or am I going to have to escort you out?"

Cynthia's already white face paled further. Sabrina's heart tightened as she watched Cynthia turn, heading for the door.

As the door slammed, Jarett swung his legs to the floor. "You stay here," he told Sabrina. "I'll handle Cynthia."

"I... no, Jarett, she's *my* sister." She moved to get up.

Jarett grasped her wrist. "Sabrina, she's not worth your care."

Sabrina flinched. Her sister was in trouble, and needed help. "And what would you suggest?" she asked him.

"A spanking, and stripping her of credit cards and money. But you can't do that."

"Well, neither can you," Sabrina said.

"Alright. I'll give you five minutes; then I'll come in and take over." He swung his legs back on the bed and watched as Sabrina wrapped the white satin

robe around her and left the room.

Cynthia sat at the bar, her head bent.

Sabrina didn't know where to begin, but knew the deathly silence between them would have to be broken by her.

"You must have had a reason for stopping by, Cynthia."

Cynthia glared at her. "I came to apologize for my behavior lately. I wanted to tell you I was sorry, and what do I find? You! You, all cuddled up in Jarett's arms. How could you do this to me?"

Sabrina felt like a coward as she plugged in the electric coffeepot. "Cynthia, you don't understand."

"Oh, I understand. I'm not blind. No wonder Jarett could hardly wait to drop me off last night. What did you do? Pass him a little love note?"

Sabrina winced. "That's enough, Cynthia. Jarett's single. I'm single. You are a married woman. The only person out of line is you. Not me. Not Jarett. Have you thought of your husband lately?"

"Leave Brian out of this," she flung back. She continued like a whirlwind, gaining in speed, throwing verbal abuse that made no sense. Every time Sabrina started to speak, Cynthia would hurl another accusation at her. Sabrina leaned against the counter, too stunned to utter a word.

The rumble of Jarett's voice finally silenced her. He ordered Sabrina from the room. She hesitated, searching her sister's face; hatred marred the lovely features, then fled to the security of her bedroom.

She would have liked a hot shower, but not for anything would she open her bedroom door. She dressed, trying not to think about what was happening. Close to tears, she placed Jarett's shirt and jacket neatly across the foot of the bed. Just then he walked in with two cups of coffee.

He took in her dressed state and frowned. "I wanted to serve you coffee in bed."

He set the mugs down on the end table and sat on the wood frame supporting the water mattress.

"Has Cynthia gone? Is she all right?" Sabrina asked.

"She's gone, and she's fine." He took a sip of his coffee, then set the cup back in the saucer. "I sent her back to her husband. That is what you wanted, isn't it?"

"Well, yes," she replied. He smiled at her. "Two sisters so alike yet so different," he mused. "Your sister's venom is nauseating, but you, Sabrina, are deadly." He stood, pulling her up with him.

His observation repelled her. He made her sound like some siren, luring unsuspecting males. "I'm nothing of the sort," she replied, trying to break away. The lazy curve to his mouth told her he was enjoying himself, and she stilled, sending him a darting glance meant to chill.

"I want you, Sabrina." His warm breath filled the sensitive hollow of her ear.

"I don't want you," she choked.

"Liar." He nipped at her ear, teasing, and whispered, "I won't undercut you any more—is that what you want to hear?"

She couldn't believe him. "You're lying!"

"No. I need you, Sabrina."

"My accounts?" she questioned, turning her head to meet his eyes. If he lied she'd be able to see it in his face, and she had to be sure.

"They belong to D. and D."

Not a flicker of betrayal crossed his features. All she could see were eyes clouded with passion. For him to give in on the issue meant one thing. He cared.

His lips touched hers, tantalizing their fullness with his own. Between the torment of brief kisses he murmured, "And you belong to me."

Her doubtful features softened, accepting his promises. A thank you lodged in her throat, and she searched his face for understanding.

He broke their embrace and quickly removed their clothes, then gathered her back into his arms. His mouth found hers, and he rendered one intoxicating kiss after another while his hands probed and explored all the secret hollows of her body, dipping into the valleys and cresting at the peaks.

Afterwards, they lay quietly in each other's arms and Sabrina felt almost reassured. "Oh, J.C." she murmured, "how I want you to love me."

He tightened his arms around her. "I did... I do... I will." Each small sentence was reinforced by a kiss, but Sabrina knew he hadn't understood her statement. He had substituted desire for love.

"I'm famished," he said suddenly, heaving the bedclothes off.

Later were sitting at the kitchen table, talking companionably over the remains of bacon and eggs, when the phone rang.

Sabrina lifted the receiver and heard a voice ask for Jarrett. She held it out to him, a puzzled frown on her face. Tiny knots twisted at the base of her stomach as he took the phone from her. Why would someone call him at her place? How did anyone know where to find him? She pushed her chair back from the kitchen table, moisture gathering on her palms.

His voice floated to her. "Yes... No problems? No hitches? No loopholes? You're sure...? Good." He hung up the receiver and turned to face Sabrina.

"How did anyone know you were here?" she asked.

He hesitated. "Your sister. She sold out, and just signed the papers making me your partner," he answered.

She wanted to lay her head down on the table, but forced herself to stiffen. She in-



haled deeply, and her lashes flickered to fan the angry heat of her accusing eyes. "You bastard," she hissed. "You promised to leave D. and D. alone."

"Don't accuse me of not keeping my word, Sabrina. I told you I wouldn't undercut, and the accounts of D. and D. would remain. I have no intention of going back on my word."

If a red-hot poker had been twisted inside of her, her pain couldn't have been more acute. His word had been given after he'd made the agreement with her sister. He'd played her for a fool, making love to her, detaining her while his finely tuned business swallowed hers.

"Your word!" Her brittle laughter scorned him. "Hollow promises, Jarett—hollow. Why would you want to undercut a company you own fifty percent of?" Before he could reply, she hurled another question at him. "And why would you want to steal accounts from a company you own fifty percent of? Hollow promises," she repeated and rose from the table.

"Can't you accept that I might have a reason for doing what I did?"

"Oh, God," she moaned. She felt a sudden chill, and she wrapped her arms around herself, trying to hold her body heat in. She turned from Jarett as she murmured, "Get out."

"Not until you understand one thing. This has nothing to do with our relationship."

"I'd rather sleep with a snake. Get out."

He didn't move, and she took a swing with a clenched fist. He dodged, and her anger mounted to new heights. Again she swung, and he stepped back.

"Don't go near D. and D., Sabrina. I'll take care of things." His voice was rock-hard. He stared into her furious eyes and went out, slamming the door behind him.

Sabrina felt as though her life was

crashing about her. Jarett had turned from a gentle lover back into the ruthless businessman.

Closing her eyes, she wished she could block Jarett from her mind, but she couldn't. She had to face reality. But her body still felt numb. She could take care of that. In the shower she turned on the cold water full force. The shock made her wince and shrink back but it was just what she needed.

A voice in the back of her mind mocked her. "Look at you, Sabrina. He's won. He's gone to your company to take over, and what are you doing? Taking a shower. You do own fifty percent of the business, don't you?" She realized that Jarett didn't have the right to run D. and D. singlehandedly. Some changes might be necessary, but he had stepped out of line by telling her to remain at home.

After drying herself briskly, she went to her closet and pulled out a black linen jumpsuit that fit her like a second skin, and put it on. She stood back, inspecting her image, and frowned. Something was wrong, but she couldn't put her finger on the problem. The jumpsuit hugged, following the line of her breasts and waist. The pointed collar was turned up at the back, the neckline falling into a modest vee. Ah, she thought, that's the problem. She slid the front zipper down, exposing the valley of her breasts. Jarett might not love her, but he desired her. She had to use every tactic available to her.

She arched a winged brow. Yes, now she was ready to challenge the tiger in "her" den.

A short while later, Sabrina swept into the outer office of D. and D. where Paddy sat behind the desk.

She tried to smile, but the effort was futile. "Where is he?" she asked. He motioned to the closed door leading to her private office. She flung the door open.

Jarett sat behind her desk, engrossed in



a phone conversation. He glanced at Sabrina, waved her in, and went on talking. "I'm sorry, Dan. No more now. Call me at D. and D. if you need me."

His gaze fell on the dipping vee of her jumpsuit as he hung up. "Let me see if I have this right. The outfit is supposed to tempt me into making a pass so you can have the satisfaction of refusing."

"That's right," she answered. "Is it working?"

He surprised her by chuckling. "Yes, it's working, but *you* forget something." His eyes glinted. "You want me as much as I want you, Sabrina. Saying no is going to be just as hard on you, maybe even harder."

She knew he was right, but she shook her head. "No, I don't think so. That was before you bought out my sister without telling me, Jarrett. Do you really think I'd be such an easy conquest now?"

"I did what I had to do. Can't you accept that?"

"You had to take the most important thing in my life?"

"Yes!" He raked an impatient hand through the mass of black curls. "Dammit, you should be counting your blessings. Having me for a partner is a vast improvement over that sister of yours."

The intercom line buzzed, indicating there was a call waiting. Jarrett reached across the desk and pressed the receiver to his ear. He thanked the man for returning his call, then proceeded to revise a contract she'd agreed to, bumping the customer to a higher figure.

"You can't do that," she protested, trying to grab the phone from him. Jarrett's long arm held her away. When he hung up the phone he turned on her. "Go home, Sabrina. The transition will be easier without you here."

"I happen to own fifty percent of this business," she countered. "Much as I hate it, there'll have to be some changes in

how things are done around here. But we've got to work these things out together. Now, call that account back and tell him you made an error."

Jarrett regarded her intently, and for a moment she thought he was going to comply. "Sabrina, you are smart, and are hard-working—but you're only twenty-two years old. You've got a lot to learn. There wasn't enough money in that deal."

She could feel herself flush with embarrassment as well as anger. "I bid low to keep you from taking the run. Now you've broken my word."

He cast an irritated glance at her. "I renegotiated. Nothing was signed. Even the customer thought it had to be an error."

"My word is my bond. But I guess you wouldn't understand that," she countered.

The slant to his mouth was grim. "I'll remember that, but right now you're a distraction, and I have business to attend to."

She moved to stand directly in front of him, hands planted on her hips. "Then go to C.I.T. and attend to it. This place is half mine."

Without another word or even a glance in her direction, Jarrett pushed his chair from the desk and got up, striding to the door and out. The last thing Sabrina heard was the screeching of his tires.

Sabrina pulled the green spread over the bed, tucking in the corners. As a final touch she smoothed a wrinkle from the pillow, the small action triggering painful memories. How many nights had it been since Jarrett's head rested there? Like a condemned man ticking off the days of life remaining, she knew the exact count. Seventeen.

For two and a half weeks she'd heard nothing from him. Nothing. He hadn't

even contacted her regarding the business, which was now operating profitably. All company affairs had been discussed with his associate, Dan Durby. Several times she'd bitten her tongue to keep from asking about Jarett. But she was too proud and too angry.

The doorbell rang, pulling her out of her helpless reverie, and her glance automatically drifted to the bedside clock. Eight. She couldn't imagine who would be calling on her so early. She paused at the door, her hand on the knob. "Who is it?"

"Me," a small voice replied. "The proverbial bad penny."

Sabrina flung the door open to see her sister's ashen face.

"Cynthia!" Her gaze locked in disbelief with her sister's. As with Jarett, there had been no communication, but in her case Sabrina would have initiated the contact if she'd known where Cynthia had been staying. Her sister stared over her shoulder, searching.

"He's not here, Cynthia. Come in and sit."

Misty blue eyes with dark circles under them looked straight into Sabrina's own. "I'm so sorry, Sabrina." Tear overflowed, choking off further speech.

Sabrina went to her sister, wrapping her arms around her. "Cynthia, it's all right."

"No, it's not. What I did is unforgivable." She swallowed, and Sabrina knew she was fighting for control. "I told Brian everything."

"Everything?" Sabrina prodded, her eyes widening questioningly as she held Cynthia at arm's length to study her face.

"Yes. After I left you I analyzed myself. Oh, I didn't reach any conclusions quickly. At first I felt completely justified. It took awhile before I realized what kind of mess I'd made of things, and realized too what kind of person I'd

become. After that, when I looked in the mirror I didn't like what I saw and decided I had to tell Brian. He had to know how vulnerable I was with Jarett and what I'd done to you, selling out and all."

Sabrina didn't want to add to her sister's guilt. "I understand why you did it now. You were desperate and scared. But what did Brian say, Cynthia?"

"That I was a no-good, selfish brat." She sniffed, and her lips tilted in a shaky smile. "But he said he loved me, and we'd work things out. He gave me until tomorrow to get home."

Sabrina gazed tenderly at her sister. For Cynthia to have confessed to Brian meant she was growing up. After they'd talked for several hours, Sabrina drove her sister to the airport.

On her way to the office she passed a truck lot featuring a new model by Peterbuilt. Her interest caught, she made a hasty U turn and parked in front of the lot. Upon entering she was greeted by a salesman. She explained she was only looking, but he opened the door of the cab and assisted her into it so she could try the air seat. She suppressed delighted laughter as the seat gave with her weight. Testing the seat, she moved, and the air adjusted, cushioning her weight, reminding her of her water bed.

Her enjoyment vanished as she caught sight of Jarett standing in front of the sales office, his attention absorbed by a petite woman with a cap of red curls. Her head was thrown back, the sun brightening her laughing features. The lady was angelic-looking with a curvaceous body. Jarett lowered his head, obviously enjoying her delighted mirth, and was adding to it, judging by the teasing sparkle of his own features.

Her insides churned. What had she expected? She got out of the truck and hurried to her car, glad that Jarett had gone inside the sales office.

An hour later after running some errands, she entered the office. Paddy wasn't at his desk. She assumed he'd be in the inner office. But the smile intended for him vanished when she opened the door and found Jarett lounging in her desk chair, his booted feet on the desk. She thought he was asleep, but then he spoke. "Are you going to continue being a shrew or come and greet me properly?"

What she wanted to do was smother him with kisses. What she did do was close the door with a bang. "I'm not a shrew." Her sharp tone indicated otherwise, and she wished she'd exerted better control.

White teeth flashed, and Jarett pushed his hat back with a forefinger. Eyes as black as coal sparkled. "Then why are you standing there when you could be sitting on my lap?"

A vision of him with the little redhead swam before her eyes. "Because I'm also not some little dolly who's going to swoon because you've decided it's my turn for a social call."

When his smile broadened, her heart lurched. "Turn for a social call." he repeated, enunciating each word slowly. "You must be referring to Nadine. Pretty, isn't she?"

Pain crept through her body. At that particular moment she would have liked to scratch his eyes out.

"If looks could kill..." he observed. "I do believe you're more jealous about Nadie than you were about your sister. Could it be you knew your sister wasn't really a threat? But Nadine? You don't know her. That's it, isn't it? You knew all along I wanted you, not Cynthia. But Nadine is entirely another matter, isn't she?"

He was right, but she couldn't admit it. Her legs trembled, and she sat on the edge of the desk, trying to appear nonchalant. She knew she was doing a lousy job.

There was unbearable quietness in the room. Then he said, "I missed you."

She couldn't believe that. "How can you say that, when you obviously had a playmate to occupy yourself with?"

He chuckled softly. "Nadine again. You do have a one-track mind." Then he told her that he'd paid off all loans owed by D. and D. "Your share of it is a gift," he finished.

How could she accept such a gift? "That's very generous of you, but I couldn't accept."

"Dammit! You don't have a choice. You haven't the money to repay me."

He was right, of course. There was only one way. The racing circuit. "I'll pay you back all right. I'm joining the racing circuit."

His lips slid into a thin line. "Like hell you will." With a violent motion, he stood, knocking over the chair. "I forbid it, Sabrina, and I mean it," he said as he stormed out of the room.

She heard muffled voices in the outer office, and then the roar of a powerful engine. She got up and opened the door. "Paddy, find out all you can about the racing circuit."

"You can't do that, Sabrina, you'll kill yourself." Paddy was distressed.

"Just get me the information." She started to leave, then turned back to Paddy. "Do you know anything about Jarett? About his family, his background?"

Paddy nodded. "I don't know much, but then, there isn't much to know: He's an orphan. He doesn't have a family." He looked away, clearing his throat. "He's a bastard, Sabrina."

Sabrina could feel the blood drain from her face, leaving her shaken and white. "Paddy," she whispered, and sank into the chair next to his desk. "Are you sure?"

He glanced back at her. "As much as I

can be. He was left on the doorstep of an orphanage. No note, no nothing. They guessed his age at maybe three days. If a mother did that, wouldn't you think it was because she wasn't married?"

"Yes," she answered, her heart twisting for the boy Jarett. "She was probably very young, too. Do you know anything else?"

"He ran away when he was sixteen, and finished school at night. He linked up with an old guy running produce, and when the old man died he left Jarett his truck. After that it's been a steady uphill climb for him."

Sabrina had heard enough. If Paddy knew any more she didn't want to hear it. She was already bleeding inside for the unwanted child growing up never knowing the security of love, a home, and possessions. He'd had to become the ruthless businessman, the man that possessed. His need for power overrode everything, which explained his behavior. Sabrina was finally beginning to understand him, but she still had her pride.

She felt the warmth of a hand pressing hers and glanced at Paddy, realizing she was crying.

"You like him too, don't you Sabrina?"

"Yes. I like him," she answered, knowing the truth was that she loved and wanted to give that love, not only sexual fulfillment, and what she wanted in return was the same, but that was something that could never be.

Sabrina isolated herself in her office, her mood a sharp contrast to the late-morning sun. It had been three days since she'd last seen or heard from Jarett, and night after night she pictured him with Nadine—his arms holding her against the firm length of his body, touching, caressing.

Trying to divert her thoughts, she pick-

ed up an application from her desk for a race in Texas. An out-of-state race meant she'd have to have time off. She called up Dan Durby, who was record-keeping for both companies, to arrange for a week's vacation. She had just put down the phone as Jarett strolled in.

He closed the distance separating them and whirled her chair until she faced him. He clasped the arms of the chair, imprisoning her, and leaned over. "I've got to go to Mexico, and I want you to be my relief driver. We'll be gone an estimated two, maybe three weeks. You drive days and I'll take the nights."

She couldn't. The race was too important. "I'm sorry, Jarett, I can't. I'm taking a week's vacation. A long run would interfere." She tried to twist her chair from his clasp, but his hold was firm, and she was forced to meet his unwavering gaze.

"I wouldn't ask, but this is important, Sabrina. It's a government run. Something went wrong with one of our unmanned space capsules. Instead of landing at its designated spot, it went off course and landed in the hills of Mexico. We know the exact location, and the Mexican authorities have granted permission for its removal, but the terrain is rough. You're my best driver."

She hesitated, but there was something about the way he looked at her that weakened her resolve. Perhaps it was because she knew he wouldn't accept no. "Oh, all right. I'll go." She soothed herself with the knowledge that there'd be other races, and if she were with Jarett she wouldn't be tortured by visions of another woman.

He smiled as she acquiesced. "Good. I knew I could count on you."

"When do we leave?" she asked.

"The truck's outside, ready. We'll stop by your place. How long will it take you to pack?"

She stood, heading for the door. "I can be ready in half an hour."

Outside, the late-afternoon sun beat down on the same sparkling black rig he'd raced in, but now fuel tanks had been added and the long trailer hooked up.

Jarett opened the door of the truck for her, and she started to swing into it, but was stopped by him circling her waist from behind.

She resisted the impulse to melt against him, and tilted her head until she could see the man behind her. "Jarett, am I going to be the subject of sexual harrassment on this trip?"

His eyes clouded over. Without further hesitation he assisted her into the truck, clearly unwilling to pursue further conversation. At her apartment she packed hurriedly, aware of Jarett's waiting in her small living room, sprawled out on the couch.

After securing the locks on her small suitcase and picking up several items still on their hangers, she walked back into the living room. She had dressed in simple shirt and jeans, and her hair was loose around her shoulders.

Jarett reached up and threaded his hands through it. "Leave your hair down always. It's so soft and silky."

Instantly, she agreed. All she seemed capable of feeling was a desire to make him happy in spite of all the pain he'd caused her. Was there no justice in love? No rationality? She could feel her love, her desire, seeping through her veins. She wanted to feel his arms, his lips pressed to hers, his—

"Damn," he cursed. "You go around looking at me like that, and we'll never make it to Mexico."

She shuddered, taking his words as a rejection. She didn't know how she'd been looking at him, but however it was, Jarett had been put off.

He swung his feet to the floor and

stood, grabbing her suitcase and the clothes she carried. "Is this all?"

"Yes," she said, and scanned the room to make sure she'd forgotten nothing. She walked slowly out the door and locked it, then followed Jarett to the truck.

She settled into her own seat, intent on ignoring Jarett, but the longer she sat there the more conscious she became of the truck and the unusual power it had. There was no comparison between this rig and her light-blue Kenworth.

"Jarett?"

He glanced at her, then back at the road. "Yes."

"Why did you ride my draft in that race? With this truck I should have been eating your dust the whole time."

"You're not going to like the answer. I was scared you'd be killed. I rode your tail to protect your rear, plus I could use my truck as a wedge if I saw someone getting too close."

She stared at him in disbelief, yet she knew he was telling the truth. He had been protecting her. At the time, if she'd had any notion of what had happened, she would have been angry, interpreting his action as male chauvinism and interference, but not now. Now it was the most endearing thing she'd ever heard of. The one thing she couldn't understand was what had possessed him to do it in the first place. "I'm not mad, Jarett, but why? Why did you do it?"

He looked in the side mirror, checking traffic, then darted a glance in her direction. "For the same reason I bought your sister's share of D. and D."

What he said made no sense. "Would... would you care to explain that?"

"No, Sabrina, I don't care to."

Why couldn't he just tell her what he meant about D. and D.? The logical deduction was that he'd been underhanded, as she'd always thought. Yet his pro-

tection on the race track showed . . . what? Love; but he couldn't. . . Too many things pointed the other way; Nadine, for instance.

Sometime later they crossed the border, entering a foreign land. The road was narrow, full of potholes. Civilization was very far away. And the clouds overhead looked ominous.

They did not stop for a meal, but ate tuna sandwiches that Jarett had brought. The evening progressed in stony silence, and she finally excused herself to seek the sleep she'd need if she were going to relieve Jarett in the morning. Fully clothed, she lay on the bed in the back, cushioning her head on the pillow, and pulled a blanket over herself.

She dozed, only to be awakened by a firm body slipping in beside her.

"What's wrong?" she asked sleepily.

"We have to stop a while. The rain's making progress dangerous."

She woke to find herself where she had wanted to be—settled in Jarett's arms. A small sigh of pleasure she had no wish to stifle escaped her. And the man she thought asleep shifted, and whispered: "Sometimes, Sabrina, you make me think you want me regardless of what lies between us."

Unable to resist, she turned in his arms and framed his face with her hands, brushing tossed curls aside. "I want to have a chance, I love you so much it's—" She stopped, startled by her own admission and dropped her hands. "But you don't love me. If you did, your attention wouldn't have so easily strayed to Nadine. You. . . you. . . don't even want to kiss me any more."

"Darling fool. Nadine is Dan's wife. We're friends, and that's it."

The blood rushed to, then ebbed from, her face, leaving her white and shaken. "How could you do that to me? Put me

through that torture?"

His lips thinned, and the gentleness she'd seen vanished. "Torture? You want to know what torture is? Picturing you with that damned boyfriend of yours, Larry. That's torture! That's why I did it."

"Larry isn't my boyfriend. Why can't you believe me?"

"And he never was?"

"No," she swore.

He looked at her closely, then said: "I believe you, Sabrina." A long hesitation followed; then he added, "Now I have something equally, no—more, important to ask of you, because our whole future is going to depend on what your answer is: First, I love you, and there's nothing in this world I want more than you. Do you understand that?"

She was puzzled but answered his question. "Yes."

He inhaled deeply. "I tried to tell you once why I bought your sister's shares of D. and D., but you wouldn't listen." He stopped, searching her face. "I knew I had to have your trust as well as your love. I loved you then, but I knew you wouldn't trust me. You preferred to believe the worst, and that hurt." He shifted in her arms. "And we kept on fighting, while all I wanted to do was whisk you off to some foreign land where we could be alone without the pressures of our past following us or the demands of business; and that's exactly what I've done. For the past three days I've been making business arrangements so I could get away indefinitely."

"The government run!" she exclaimed. "There isn't one. You tricked me."

"Sabrina, I had to do something. Don't be angry." Suddenly, Jarett sounded less sure of himself.

She wasn't angry at all. She thought it the most romantic thing she'd ever heard of, his bearing her off to the middle of

nowhere.

"Can you agree to marry me without any explanations over D. and D.?" he asked.

"You want blind faith?"

"I want it all, Sabrina." His eyes held hers. "I want your love, your faith, your trust with no questions asked. Unreasonable devotion, that's what I want."

Silently, she wept, her heart crying for her eyes. She knew where this need for unreasonable devotion stemmed from. He was faced with love for the first time in his life, and he needed more than what was reasonable for her to give. He was asking for a gift of love, no strings attached. Her mind said, "Don't trust," while her heart said, "I don't care. I love." She wound her arms around his neck, clinging to him. "How long will it take you to find a minister? The faster we're married, the better. I love you so much I can't stand the thought of not being your wife."

He sighed with relief. "Sabrina, about D. and D.—"

"You weren't going to tell me, and I don't want to hear." She was startled to realize she was telling the truth. Jarett had really won. She did have blind faith.

"Honey, you've given me what I wanted. Now I want to give you the explanation as a wedding gift. I insist." He didn't allow her to speak but went on. "It has to do with Sunrise Trucking."

She frowned at the mention of the unscrupulous company. It had given the whole industry a bad name.

He continued. "I've been battling with Sunrise for power. D. and D. was important to me because it was a southern California company. If I didn't buy it Sunrise would have. Or destroyed you."

"I wouldn't sell to Sunrise. Never!"

"You wouldn't have had the choice, Sabrina. Sunrise..." He left the name hanging in the air. "You've been around

trucking long enough to know what Sunrise would do."

She nodded. D. and D. wouldn't have been the first to go up in flames, or to have its trucks destroyed mysteriously in the middle of the night.

He proceeded. "California is my home base, and I had no intention of letting Sunrise in as a neighbor. I had to either buy up the small companies as fast as I could or face that possibility. I didn't really have any problems in obtaining control of other small companies. If they resisted, I put the pressure on. As a matter of fact, in every one of those instances the owners have been given jobs and have proved to be my best and most loyal employees. So when I saw the opportunity to buy your sister's stock, I took it. With C.I.T. and D. and D. united, I covered two problems—the original one, which brought us together in the first place: keeping Sunrise out of California. And the second, but most important was keeping you safe. I didn't dare let you get wind of the sale before it was completed. I could see you stopping it. So I did the only thing I could. I kept you in bed."

"That's what you meant when you said you bought Cynthia's stock for the same reason you rode my tail in the race. You were protecting me."

"Yes. My company is too large for Sunrise to try any of their underhanded dealings with, Sabrina. I had to—"

She silenced him by placing a finger over his mouth. "Don't say any more, Jarett. I've been a fool."

"One other thing, Sabrina. No more racing," he said, smiling.

She returned his smile. "That goes for you, too." In a seductive tone she added, "J.C., pretend I said no to marrying you, and now you must convince me." She parted moist lips.

He lowered his head to obey her irresistible command. ♥



# *Hearts Are Wild*

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*Emily Farrell plays high-stakes poker, and she always plays to win. But when Michael Mategna's disconcerting gaze ruins her concentration, Emily finds herself engaged in a game with the highest stakes of all: her heart and her future!*

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JANET GRAY

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**P**rofessional poker player Emily Farrell watched Hutchins's pudgy hands move smoothly to take the card he was dealt across the green baize table. She noted that when he was bluffing he moved his thumb across his palm to rub the chunky gold ring on his pinkie. She could read him. She was concerned, however, about the second man at the table, Sime. He looked, talked, and moved like an amateur, but something told Emily he was

crooked to the core. It remained to be seen if he cheated at cards.

Emily was pleased when she took two of the next three hands, one with a straight, ace high, and the other with a bluff. Her pile of chips was substantial.

Next to her, Hutchins chuckled with false good humor. "Well, pretty lady, them green eyes of yours sure do get as cold as ice when you're playing poker."

Emily smiled so the dimple in her left

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cheek showed. "You knew I was a professional card player when we sat down at the table, didn't you, Mr. Hutchins?"

The businessman snorted softly. "Yeah, sure," he said.

A new voice, deep and vibrant, startled her. "May I sit in?"

Hutchins looked up pugnaciously, but the house dealer was already indicating a chair and changing money for the man. As he moved to sit down, his sureness hinted at an athletic body, and Emily found herself wondering what was beneath the beautifully cut tweed suit that lent the attractive stranger an aura of casual refinement, as though he were a European aristocrat or an Ivy League graduate and heir to old money.

Then the stranger's eyes met hers and he smiled, open, easy, confident. Something tangible yet invisible passed between them, like particles of light in a sunbeam, and Emily felt a flash of heat spread from her solar plexus down to her toes.

Stunned by the impact the man made on her, she swallowed hard, but kept her poker face expressionless.

The newcomer folded his hands on the table and nodded that he was ready to play, then directed his studied attention toward Emily again. She had never met this man before, but the attraction she felt to him was undeniable and very distracting.

Could she pick up her cards without trembling? She must pull herself together. This was poker, and there was no room for emotion while she was working. It only led to trouble. Love had blinded her to a charming man's weaknesses once and she had vowed it would never happen again.

The disturbing stranger received a drink from the unobtrusive cocktail waitress and tipped her. "Thank you, Mr. Mategna," Emily heard her say.

She tried to center herself on her goal again, the same goal she always had at the table: winning.

When the deal was finished she had a pair of queens. Sometimes it was possible to win with a high pair like this, sometimes not. It was always possible to win with a good bluff, however, and Emily decided on this course. When the bet came to her, she met it and doubled. Soon the players with less interest and nerve folded and sat back to see who would get the money they had contributed to the pot. Eventually, only Emily and Sime were left.

Then she looked up and caught Mategna suppressing a grin as he watched her. She frowned at her cards. What was wrong with this man? Didn't he know what he was doing to her? Like a flash, the answer hit her. Of course he knew! This Mategna character must be working with one of the others, trying to upset her so she would play badly. This sort of ploy was not uncommon in the upper echelons of poker. And since only Sime would not back down, he must be the partner.

Emily raised her chin in obstinate resolve to ignore him and turned back to the work at hand, even though she felt herself blushing. Why had she even looked at him? she chided herself furiously.

With unaccustomed impatience, she decided to try to end the hand before she had bluffed Sime into folding. "I'll call," she said firmly, telling herself that Sime had nothing.

He did seem a little relieved when she quit raising. Now it was down to who had the better cards. Sime held a pair of aces, as it turned out.

Emily was angry, not because of the worth of the chips a grinning Sime swept toward himself with an air of happy disbelief, but at the ease with which she had been distracted by Mategna. Experience had shown her that when she was emotional she couldn't play well, so she

decided to stop for the evening.

"Gentlemen," she said, rising from her seat and smoothing her skirt, "thank you for a very challenging game. I'm afraid I have to cash in my chips now." She felt Mategna's gaze follow her, but she refused to look at him as she turned and walked away.

After a visit to the cashier, Emily walked out into the hotel garden and breathed in the crisp, cold mountain air gratefully. The sky overhead was showing the first milky traces of dawn in a cloudless sky.

She reminded herself that it was a matter of honor that she keep playing and winning until her father's debts were paid off. Another \$40,000 and she would be in the clear.

Her father had gotten deeply in debt—almost \$250,000 just before the automobile accident that took his life. No doubt he'd expected to recoup, but he hadn't had the luxury of time. Emily sighed. She had plenty of time.

"Excuse me."

She recognized the deep voice immediately, even though she had only heard it once before. It sent a sensual shiver from the small of her back up to the nape of her neck. Emily turned slowly.

It was Mategna, looking darkly handsome even in the pre-dawn dimness. She fought an impulse to smile a welcome, to step toward him.

"Yes," she said in a guarded tone. "What is it?"

"I wanted to tell you what a pleasure it was watching you play cards. You're very good."

The sound of his voice almost made her light-headed, and she took a step backward as if to deny the attraction she felt.

"I am a professional," she answered.

"You really make a living at playing cards?" he said with mild disbelief.

"You're not truly surprised, are you?"

she countered, not believing for a second that he hadn't known who and what she was when he sat down.

"It's just that I picture women gamblers as thick-skinned, older women who are as tough as nails from a lot of hard knocks."

Emily shrugged. "I *am* as hard as nails."

"I don't think so. I think you're a wildflower of a girl who belongs in soft angora sweaters. Seafoam-colored angora." A tender irony gleamed in his eyes.

Emily shook her head and tried to look as if she weren't surprised. He must have seen her earlier in the evening looking at that sweater in the window of the hotel shop. Had he been watching her all night?

"Why didn't you buy it?" he asked. "I could tell you really liked it."

"Not very practical. If I were to wear such a sweater," she responded cautiously, "it would create a false impression of me as an emotional, girlish person, which I'm not. I try not to deceive people about my nature."

His voice stroked her like fur, intimate in the motionless air. "And how about deceiving yourself?"

"Not a chance." She glared at him. "This has been fascinating, but I really must go."

"Let me buy you a drink," he said quickly.

"Sorry, I don't drink." With strangers, she added mentally.

"Then how about a cup of coffee?" Mategna smiled.

"Perhaps another time."

She started to leave, and his hand shot out to grasp her arm, lightly but with unquestionable authority.

"Just a moment, please. I'm being as pleasant as I know how to be, but I still get the impression you're angry with me. I want to know why."

The touch of his hand on her arm sent a

vivid response all through Emily's body, from her head to her toes, and she blurted out what she might otherwise have kept to herself.

"You know perfectly well you interfered with my play tonight by distracting me at the table!" She pulled away from him.

"How did I do that?" he challenged.

"By staring at me so rudely. I think you should know I'm on to you and Sime." She watched him closely to see what effect this accusation would have.

"Sime? That ratty little man who won the last hand?" He laughed. "What makes you think I have any connection to him?"

"Experience."

He gently took her arm again and directed her back inside the hotel. "Tell me more about all this experience of yours over—breakfast?"

A hunger pang overcame Emily's better judgment—at least that's what she told herself—and she let Mategna lead her into the twenty-four hour restaurant across the hotel lobby. If the thought that knowing more about her would make her easier for his tacky partner Sime to hustle, he was mistaken.

"How did you get to be a professional card-player?" he asked, when they were seated.

"A bunch of us went to Vegas one weekend when I was in college. My father had taught me to play poker, and I did so well I decided to stay over and see if my luck would hold. I dropped out of UCLA in my senior year and started making a living." No need to tell him all the details, she told herself. "How about yourself, Mr. Mategna, do you gamble much?"

"Call me Michael," he said. "And you?"

"Emily Farrell. You haven't answered my question."

"I live in San Francisco and have a condo up here where I come for the skiing

every winter. I'm—a lawyer on vacation, and I don't know anyone in Tahoe." He reached across the table and curled his hand around hers. "I don't gamble much, but I do intend to make a new friend."

Emily withdrew her hand and sat up straight. "I'm not that easy to know."

"No?" He looked as if he didn't believe her.

Emily shook her head. "I've learned my lessons the hard way."

"You must have," he said thoughtfully. "You're much too young to be cynical by nature."

"I'm twenty-seven," she countered. "How about *you*?"

"Thirty-two."

"And so wise already? Let me see if I can guess some things about you from your appearance and what you've told me, okay?"

"Sure, go ahead. Play Sherlock Holmes." He seemed amused.

"Okay, Italian name—your father's family got its money from fishing or boats or restaurants."

"All three." He grinned.

"You got your undergraduate degree at Stanford. Then you went on to—mm, Harvard law."

"Yale, actually." His reply was cautious.

She pursed her lips and cast an appraising eye at his shoulders. "And you earned a letter in some sport as an undergraduate."

He leaned back and folded his arms on his chest. "The question is, which sport, lady oracle?"

"Maybe something like the pole vault, or swimming."

"Swimming," he admitted. "Hey, can you do this with everybody? Or dare I hope you are particularly interested in me?"

Emily didn't want to answer that question at all. "You gave me some clues, of

course. But nothing I guessed about you tells me what you're actually like, or what you're thinking."

"Well," he drawled, leaning toward her, "it's no secret how I feel about you. How about having lunch with me tomorrow so you can uncover some more of my secrets?"

In spite of the loud clanging of her internal warning system, Emily wanted to spend more time with this attractive man. Besides, it would give her a chance to find out what he and Sime hoped to accomplish by getting to know her better, she rationalized.

"How about noon? I'll pick you up."

Despite herself, she nodded. He was really too high-class for Sime, she told herself, but something also told her there was more to Michael Mategna than met the eye. Whether he was hiding something on purpose or by instinct, she knew she would find out what it was, sooner or later.

When they had finished eating, Michael insisted on walking Emily to her room. At her door, he put a hand on the wall next to her shoulder and leaned down.

"I want to kiss you."

"I'd rather you didn't," she whispered, unable to hear her own words for the music in her ears.

"I don't believe you," he said softly.

His lips touched hers, soft as a feather, and she froze for an instant, waiting to see what would happen next. Then his gentleness told her he wouldn't demand more than she wanted to give, and Emily closed her eyes and released herself to the sensation of Michael's caressing kiss. Her body trembled, and without thinking she raised her arms to place them around Michael's neck. But he caught her hands, forced them back down to her sides, and stood back, much to her confusion.

"Now, now, Emily! Don't get carried

away by your emotions. Let's wait until tomorrow to make love." The velvet voice sounded raspy now.

Mortified, Emily snapped at him, "Wait till doomsday, for all I care!" Then she quickly retreated into her room, and slammed the door in his arrogant, conceited face.

The sun was high overhead when Emily awoke after a restless night's sleep and went to look out the window. All the time she was taking her shower and drying her hair, she thought about Michael Mategna. The anger she had felt after he kissed and teased her was already gone.

The man knew she was attracted to him in spite of her resistance, and there was certainly no doubt that he was pursuing her or that he controlled the situation. The question was whether he was attracted to her for her own sake, or if he had some other motive.

She dressed quickly, grabbed her purse and headed out the door at noon.

She waited ten minutes. When Michael didn't appear, she decided, it was for the best and set off to take a walk instead. As she crossed one of the wide hotel drive-ways, a gun-metal-gray Porsche slid to a stop right in front of her, blocking her path. Michael Mategna emerged on the driver's side and stood looking at her across the roof of the car. "Good thing I saw you as I was driving by, or we would have missed each other. Have you eaten yet? I'd planned to take you to a favorite place of mine."

She stood looking at him, indecisive. Now was the time to give Michael the brush-off if she was going to, so why wasn't she doing it?

"I'm sorry I'm late. Please get in," he said.

Emily barely hesitated before sinking into the black leather upholstery and drawing her feet in after her. Michael

closed the car door with definite authority then got in his side and began driving in silence.

They were across the border into California before either of them spoke.

"Something is bothering you," Michael said. "You're acting like an ice cube, and here I was hoping you'd be glad to see me."

She looked over at him without any expression, determined to repress all feelings and remain as objective as possible. "I'm not trying to be difficult or sulky. I just wasn't sure I was ready to see you again after last night."

"I think you'll be pleased you came when you see what's in that bag behind you."

Looking over her shoulder, Emily saw a green and white striped bag from the hotel boutique, which she had not noticed before. She twisted around to grab it with one hand and pulled it into her lap. With a little frown, she reached inside and pulled out the intricately hand-knit angora sweater she had looked at in the shop window last night.

"It's for you," he assured her.

"Michael, you shouldn't have. It's too extravagant!"

"Not at all. I wanted to please you."

She leaned toward him to give him a little thank-you kiss, but he adroitly turned his face toward her so their lips met. Emily gave a startled laugh. Michael was full of surprises, and she even liked some of them, she thought as she sat back in the car seat. "Eyes on the road, please, Romeo."

To her own astonishment, Emily now found herself looking forward to her day with Michael. He was a good conversationalist and soon took her mind off the doubts and fears she had entertained concerning him. By the time they reached their destination, an old country inn, they were laughing together like old friends,

and she realized she liked him in addition to being attracted to him.

Emily brought the striped bag into the dining room with her, and after the hostess showed them to a table, Emily excused herself for a moment. In the ladies' room, she exchanged her cardigan and silk shirt for the soft angora pullover. Wearing the sweater was the nicest way she could think of to thank Michael for giving it to her.

She was hardly prepared, however, for the look in his eyes when he saw her approaching. It was almost as if she had suddenly tried to look into the sun, and she had to look away. Could she have possibly made him so happy with such a small gesture?

After they had ordered, he leaned back in his chair and hooked his thumbs in his belt, watching her run her fingers over the silky fluff of one angora sleeve rather absently. It made her feel soft and romantic.

"Your dimple is showing, Emily. What are you thinking about?"

"I'm just enjoying myself. Last night I didn't even think I liked you very much."

He reached across the table and covered her hand with his own strong, sure one. "I could smell your perfume in my dreams."

Just on the verge of melting totally, Emily stiffened her resolve not to take him only at his word. His appeal was so emotional and so strongly physical that she was reluctant to trust it. "You just don't seem like a lawyer on vacation to me. There's not even any skiing right now. And I've usually got pretty good instincts—I showed you that." She looked up at him pleadingly, not wanting to hurt him if he *was* sincere, but not wanting to be hurt, either.

"You're right to some extent. I'm not on vacation. I am an attorney, but I don't practice law anymore, not the way I used

to, at any rate. I can't tell you the whole reason I'm here at this moment, and I won't try to make up something that would be a lie. I just have to ask you to trust me."

Emily tried to smile, but she couldn't. Trusting didn't come easy to her.

Michael looked at her strangely. "You said you had good instincts, Emily. Don't they tell you to trust me?"

"Yes and no," she replied.

"Put me on probation, then, but give me a chance, okay?"

"All right. I guess that's what I really want, too." It was as if a weight had been lifted from her heart, and she felt suddenly happy.

Michael's eyes flashed with sunshine and he reached out and took her hand in his. Then he turned the hand palm up and kissed her wrist, opened her curled fingers with his own, and pressed another sweet kiss to her tingling palm. "Kind lady," he murmured.

The electricity that traveled up her arms was so palpable Emily wondered why the other diners didn't look up to see where lightning had struck. If her response to this minor lovemaking was so strong, what would it be like in the privacy of a bedroom?

She tried to gather her wits about her. "What else shall we do today?"

Michael looked at her, cocked a wicked eyebrow, and began a slow, very sensual-looking smile.

She laughed. "Don't tell me the courtship is over already?"

"Not at all. It's just beginning," he said.

"Are you going to start reciting poetry to me?" Emily laughed as they rose from the table and walked outside.

"Come home with me and I'll give you all the poetry you can handle," he said.

"You read poetry books?" she asked him, purposely avoiding the meaning that

lay beneath his suggestion.

"As a matter of fact, I do."

"I don't think I believe you."

"The only way I can prove it is if you come home with me. Come on, Emily, call my bluff," he challenged, putting his arms around her waist.

"I'll have to think it over."

"While you're thinking, think about this."

His embrace tightened, gentle arms wrapping her in a warm, lush blanket of sensuality. Michael's lips met hers lightly, with a tantalizing softness, as his mouth made love to hers. Emily lost all sense of time and place. She felt like a bubble of air rising through still ocean darkness toward the sun's white glow. Her knees grew weak and started to buckle.

Drawing back, she said, "I don't think I could stand any more poetry than this today, Michael. I better go back to my room now."

He allowed her to stand by herself, but slid a protective arm around her shoulders. "It will be waiting for you when you're ready, sweetheart."

He was as good as his word. They saw each other several times over the next few days, sometimes by arrangement, sometimes just running into each other in the casino. Emily was beginning to feel almost secure with him, to look forward to seeing him every day. And yet, she suspected there was some watchfulness about Michael as he played cards with little concentration or strolled around the casino, as if looking for something or someone. His distracted air puzzled her. Why had he come here? What was he looking for? Something outside the charmed circle of their relationship was going to intrude sooner or later, she realized finally, and the more she was prepared for it, the better she would be able to handle it.

"Let's go riding," she suggested one



afternoon, feeling that they needed to be alone together, away from the gambling atmosphere.

Michael agreed immediately, and together they drove out of town to a horse farm Emily had often visited.

The groom at the riding stable recognized Emily as soon as she got out of the car. "Hi, Miss Farrell. Long time, no see. Will you be wanting Star today?"

"Yes, please, Sam. And I think my friend would enjoy Stockings."

They mounted the horses, and together they rode off across the field. Soon they were in the midst of the forest. Though it was nearly summer, there were still patches of snow on the north side of the occasional rock outcroppings, and the cool air soon brought a glow to Emily's cheeks.

Conversation remained casual until Emily turned to face her companion, "I still don't understand exactly why you sat down at the no-limit poker table the night we met."

"You know why. When I noticed you earlier that night I wanted to meet you. You looked special to me. More *there* than anyone else I'd ever seen."

It was hard to tell, because of the movement of the horses, but Michael seemed to be looking at her as if she were indeed special to him. Emily knew suddenly that she wanted desperately for it to be so.

She kicked her mount's flanks lightly and urged the animal to a quicker pace. Michael followed at once, and it turned into a full-fledged race, until the trail became too rough for the horses to gallop. They slowed, and Emily slid to the ground in the shadow of a cliff at the edge of a small snowfield that was on the verge of becoming slushy. She leaned against her horse for a moment to catch her breath and calm the tumult in her heart that Michael's words had caused.

He reined in nearby and dismounted, coming toward her with a dangerous glint

in his eyes.

"Look at all this snow!" cried Emily breathlessly, determined to forestall him. "I've always wanted to build a snowman in May."

She ran into the middle of the snowfield and bent down to begin scooping snow into a big mound in front of her. Michael hesitated a moment, then sauntered over.

"So you want to play in the snow? Prepare to defend yourself, Michael said as he lobbed a soft snowball at her. It hit her shoulder, flattened, and stuck as only soft, moist snow will.

"You rat!" she shrieked in delight.

Quickly, she jumped up, gathered an armful of snowballs, and started toward him, throwing one snowball after another. "I'll teach you to make surprise attacks!"

But Michael retaliated. As he launched himself at her she threw a handful of loose snow in his face and collapsed under him, screaming, "No-no-no! Stop!"

Their laughing struggles suddenly ceased, and Michael was looking at her, excitement burning in his eyes. His face hovered over hers, blotting out the sky. She was acutely aware of being pressed against him, and she felt a sharp surge of desire.

His grip on her shoulders changed. Emily became certain that Michael was going to kiss her... and she wanted him to. But as his lips descended toward hers, she felt a moment of panic at the intensity of her own feelings. She turned her face away, and his lips met her earlobe instead of their intended target.

Michael's fingers gently pulled back the strands of hair that had tangled across her face.

"Look at me, Emily."

She turned her face back to him and reluctantly raised her eyes to meet his.

He began to kiss her lower lip and each

corner of her mouth, etching a trail of fire as she held her face up eagerly for more. Waves of excitement swept over her at the soft intrusion of his tongue. Tiny fireworks sparkled and exploded in her brain. It was too much. She felt herself sinking, her will being submerged in his. She didn't want to feel like this.

"Stop, Michael. Don't," she moaned, turning her head aside to break the intimate contact. "No more."

Michael stopped his ardent caresses for a moment, but did not release her.

"Why are you fighting your feelings, darling?" he whispered. "Your eyes show the emerald fire that's banked inside, underneath the shell."

His body surged strongly against hers, making Emily feel his need even through their heavy, wet clothes. The response of her own body to his touch was instinctive, stronger than anything she had ever experienced before.

"I wanted you from the moment I saw you," he said huskily.

Emily felt his strong hands move down her back, then slide under the bulky sweater to stroke each vertebra as they moved upward. The delightful tremors of sensation this created turned into a genuine shiver as the snow-chilled air hit her bare skin and her teeth clattered audibly together.

Michael broke off, immediately aware of her discomfort. "You're wet through," he said reluctantly but with evident concern.

He stood up and brushed off the snow that clung to his jeans and shirt. Emily took the hand he offered to help her up.

"Let's get these poor bored horses home to their stalls," he suggested. "And then, let me give you some dinner to warm you up."

"No self-respecting restaurant would allow us in the door looking like this," Emily said.

"I have a plan. Warmth, good food, restful atmosphere, and I can guarantee you won't catch cold."

"Why do I have a feeling it's *chez toi*?"

"Because you're a very perceptive lady. My place it is, then."

Too tired and cold to fight, Emily sighed and told herself she could handle Michael if she just handled herself. "All right, then."

Later as they drove along, she worked at dredging up her earlier suspicions, trying to rebuild the wall that had protected her, if only a little, from her feelings about Michael. If he were studying her for some devious purpose, she would have to be on her guard.

Michael's house turned out to be a warm and elegant cottage with a huge living room and a loft bedroom. The place was decorated with Navajo rugs and weavings, and Papago basketry. Clearly, Michael had excellent taste, and the money to indulge it.

Once inside, he said, with a gesture toward the loft, "You go upstairs and get into some dry clothes. I'll start dinner while you change."

Emily hurried up the narrow staircase at one side of the room and rummaged through the closet looking for something to wear. She finally decided to settle for a long, dark green velour bathrobe.

In the bathroom, she stripped off her clammy garments and dried herself with a towel. Hopefully, while they ate, her clothes would dry if she spread them in front of the fireplace.

After rolling them all into a big fluffy towel, Emily emerged, clad cozily in the robe, to find Michael in the bedroom unbuttoning his shirt.

She brushed right by him, taking care not to look him in the eyes and went quickly downstairs and spread her clothes on the floor in front of the fireplace, carefully concealing her underwear.

Then she poured herself a glass of Chianti from a straw-covered bottle on the counter and took a long, warming sip.

Michael came down wearing a crimson robe and looking extremely handsome. "My tomato sauce is almost heated," he said. "Shall I put the spaghetti on?"

"I'm ready to eat," she responded to his query, thinking, *And I'm ready for anything else you dish up, Michael Mategna.*

Sitting at the butcher-block table in the kitchen, they ate from simple stoneware plates and talked as they ate.

"You look far too sweet and innocent with your face all shiny and clean. Even though I've seen you in action, I still find it hard to believe that you're a lady gambler." He shook his head as if to accentuate his disbelief, and there was an amused twinkle in his eyes.

His air of superiority annoyed Emily. "There are lots of professionals like me, young and old. It's like any other career."

"Gambling is really a man's profession, though," he insisted.

"Lots of opportunities are opening up to women in every field, Michael. There are a lot of women professional card players. True, it's a tough life. And friendships are rather haphazard because we all move around a lot. But if there's a real emergency, I have a few friends I can turn to."

Michael poked at his salad, paying more attention to what she was saying than the food. "And you really like it? It would seem to me to be a very unsettled, gypsylike existence, too unattached for most women."

"Call it freedom." She shrugged, a little defensively. "What about you? I suppose you are always surrounded by friends and family—and that you enjoy it?"

"Yes, I do have lots of family. My

father's family is big and warm, and my mother's family goes back so far in San Francisco that I'm always running into someone I'm distantly related to. I myself, however, have never been married. In a way," he continued, "I'm as free as you are, but freedom has its drawbacks. There has to be more than that involved in a choice of profession, don't you think?"

Emily made a face. "I admit I play cards for the money! Is that what you wanted to hear?" She laughed.

"It's lucrative, then? And all tax free?"

"Hardly. I'm very careful to do my share in supporting the government."

"I'm glad to hear it."

"Why?"

"I like honest people," he said.

"Do you really?" Because her suspicions about him had never been fully put to rest, Emily still found herself hearing irony in many of his statements, but she was trying not to be unfair.

"Sure," he continued casually, taking a swig of wine. "So—you're into gambling for the money?"

"I told you, money is very important to me." She wasn't about to tell him that she desperately needed to raise another \$40,000 to pay back the consolidated loan which Waco, her dear old friend, had underwritten so that she could pay back her father's debts.

"I'm surprised that you feel that way. I know from personal experience that money can't buy happiness."

She looked at him silently for a minute. "Sure. More than a certain amount of money doesn't *add* to people's happiness. But money can take a lot of worry and stress out of one's life."

"But as you indicated, there's a cutoff point where more money doesn't add more happiness. Where's *your* cutoff point, Emily?"

She felt certain that the man who had

been a rich boy would never understand her rags-to-riches-to-rags-to-riches-again childhood and adolescence, and what it had done to her. "I'll know it when I get there. Why put limits on myself until then?"

When they were finally satiated with spaghetti, she helped him stack and rinse the dishes before they returned to the living room carrying their refilled wine-glasses.

Full of food and wine, warm and relaxed, Emily began to nod as the fire snapped and flickered hypnotically. When Michael's arm went around her shoulder, she let him draw her over to rest against him.

Then he leaned over and kissed her. The thrill that shot through her brought her back to vivid awareness, and she started to pull back.

"I don't want to start anything I can't finish, Michael. You'd better take me back to the hotel now."

"Just stay and talk for a while longer. I enjoy being with you. I want to know more about you, Emily." He removed his arm from her shoulders. "Tell me about your father. You said he taught you to play poker. Did he like your card-playing career?"

"I never had the chance to ask him. He was killed in a car accident shortly after I started playing." She shrugged. She didn't feel ready to tell this seductive man the story of her life, her father's debts, her mother's shame over them, and her own promise to set things right. If Michael was what he said he was, he could only disapprove of her father, and Emily would not accept that from someone who hadn't known him. On the other hand, if Michael was not what he pretended to be, she didn't want to give him any material to use in psyching her out.

"Well, what about your mother?" The tender concern in his voice soothed her

fears enough that she gave him at least a partial answer.

"She died a year before Daddy was killed," she said somewhat curtly. And four years after he walked out, she thought.

His face grew soft in the firelight as he looked at her, although the crease of a frown marked his forehead. He put his arm around her, a comforting presence in the silence that stretched out between them.

"You know," he murmured, "I grew up with everything handed to me on a silver platter, and it's been like fighting my way out from under a velvet blanket. No one has ever understood why I felt smothered. You're lucky to have learned to work and to use your talents early. I admire your ability to be tough-minded when you have to, but I wish you'd relax a little, here and now, with me."

Emily didn't move. His appeal troubled her, but she was still uncertain.

"Let's just say you're invading my privacy and there are things I don't want to talk about, especially to other gamblers."

"Who said I was a gambler, Emily? The only thing I'm willing to gamble on right now is that you're as attracted to me as I am to you."

She leaned back into his arm, which was resting on the back of the sofa. Maybe they could just enjoy each other's company without getting in too deep.

"This place," she said, trying to relax. "It's just great. Anyone would want to spend all the time here they could."

His eyes brightened. "You can spend all the time here you want to," he invited. "but I come with it."

"That makes it even more tempting." Emily smiled and Michael kissed the top of her nose. "I'd like to have a home someplace," she continued. "I've been rootless for so long."

He nodded. "I understand. Despite my

roots, I feel homeless, too. And lonely. You can be lonely even when you're with someone, if it's not the right person." Michael kissed her cheekbone.

"Are—are you lonely now?" she asked, looking up at him.

"No," he whispered.

"Neither am I," she murmured.

He kissed her again, softly, and then he pushed her gently back to lie full length along the sofa, while his hands moved down to her slim waist. Aware that this was new and dangerous territory they were entering, Emily tried to twist away. "Michael, I think we'd better stop."

"Mmm" was his only response. He stretched out next to her and the length of his body next to hers made Emily ache with a longing she was not sure she wanted to feel. The shy blossom developing in her heart was still afraid of this new, tropical climate, which might be too intense for it.

But his touch entranced her, and she made no move to pull away, waiting in silent assent for him to continue.

He sighed. "Emily, I need you so much—" He began making love to her in a way she had never experienced before. Or was it, wondered Emily dazedly, that it was better because it was *him*, because it was Michael?

Even as her head spun with the wanting he created in her, Emily could not yet respond in a totally open and giving way to him. She was unpleasantly relieved when they were interrupted by the shrilling of the telephone.

Michael pulled away and sat up, shaking his head as if to clear it of the intrusive sound. But the phone kept on ringing insistently. "Sorry, can't concentrate," he said ruefully. He rose, pulling his robe around him, and stalked off toward the kitchen, letting the door swing closed behind him. Emily heard only a muffled impatience in his voice as he answered

Left alone, without Michael's warmth, she felt cold. Refastening her robe, she wondered fretfully who had called. And why hadn't he picked up his call here in the living room? The only logical answer seemed to be that he didn't want her to hear the conversation. He was hiding something from her and to her that meant only one thing—betrayal. Her chin set firmly, she carried the empty wineglasses toward the kitchen.

Just as she pushed open the kitchen door, she heard his words—words that plunged her into misery.

"Sime! Yes, I'm sure."

Emily's head felt all hollow inside as her heart dived downward. He'd said he didn't know Sime. Or had he? She tried to remember.

There was an angry note in Michael's voice as he continued. "Yes, she's here. I told you, but—"

Quietly, she stepped back and let the door close in front of her. She needed time to think. She felt dizzy and breathless and slightly nauseated. She had been wrong about him, wrong to feel the way she did, wrong to have trusted him and let him through her defenses.

She must get away from him any way she could. And if she borrowed his car, he wouldn't be able to follow her and force a confrontation.

Determinedly setting the glasses carefully on the table, Emily picked up his car keys and walked out the front door still in her robe, slamming it behind her as the anger began to take over.

"Good-by, you fool," she said to a part of herself, as she got in the Porsche and drove away, with angry tears in her eyes, determined to leave the gullible, vulnerable part of herself behind in Michael Mategna's condo.

"Oh, Miss Farrell! There's a message for you."

The desk clerk handed Emily a folded note when she arrived at the hotel an hour later. It was from Waco Bilby, inviting her to a private game in his room with some out-of-town businessmen who were looking for high-class recreation.

Good old Waco, thought Emily. Bilby had been her father's friend and had watched Emily's first tentative steps as a child and later in the world of professional poker. He had come to her rescue more than once. And now he was coming up with just the thing she needed to get her mind off the fiasco of her personal life and back on business.

She showered and changed, and slipped on her famous diamond-emerald earrings which always brought her luck. It was well known that, although she did not always wear them, when Emily Farrell wore her emerald earrings, she won.

It was only superstition, she knew, but gave her a colorful reputation that helped her gain entree to the big private games where the money flowed freely among the amateurs.

She arrived at Waco's suite with five minutes to spare. Waco opened the door, and his small, round face broke into a delighted smile as he looked up at her. "Darlin', you made it! And you're wearing high heels. Look at Emily, fellows," he called, leading her into the room. "When she gets all dolled up like this, it means we're in for one hell of a card game, don't it' hon?"

But Emily barely noticed what Waco was saying, for one of the men standing at the table was Sime. Well, she'd show him alright. Mr. Sime was going to lose and she was going to win, there was no doubt at all in her mind. Emily noticed another familiar face before she sat down, Hutchins. This might prove an interesting and informative evening.

Waco introduced Emily to the out-of-town businessmen, and clarified the terms.

All nodded assent and the game began.

Even though Sime's presence in the game was a constant reminder of Michael's betrayal, Emily played well, translating her hot anger into cold determination. Table talk was nearly nonexistent as everyone concentrated on the game.

A couple of intense hours passed. Hutchins was the first to lose his nerve. "Cash me out, pretty lady. I don't believe I'm up to this stiff competition tonight."

She counted out his money. "There you are, Mr. Hutchins."

He picked up the money, and then his eyes darted toward Sime. "You coming, Sime?"

"No. I'm doing fine. Maybe I'll buy you a drink in the bar downstairs later."

"With what?" Hutchins blurted out angrily. "You've been losing all night!"

"My luck's due to change. As a matter of fact, I think I'll buy some more chips from Miss Farrell. Much obliged, honey."

Emily watched this interchange with curiosity. If these two were working together, as now seemed obvious, what role did Michael Mategna have in their conspiracy?

Hutchins muttered an oath and stalked off, slamming the door behind him.

Despite his optimism, Sime kept losing. When the game finally broke up, Emily was not sorry to see that he had been one of the big losers, and was convinced that he was not a card cheat. As he left the room looking a little sick, she wondered what he would tell his friend.

When the players had all left, it was after two in the morning. Emily counted up her winnings and discovered that she had added about \$20,000 in cold cash to her assets.

She looked up from her seat at the table to find that Waco was watching her with a pleased expression in his little button eyes.

"We did ourselves proud tonight, honeybee. This'll set you up all right and proper for the big poker tournament in Vegas next week, won't it?"

Emily smiled at his concern as the tenderness she felt for her substitute father welled up inside. "That's no problem, Waco. I've got the money for that set aside already. With this money, I can make a payment on Daddy's account and just play for myself at the tournament, have a little fun. Why don't we go down and put our winnings in the hotel safe together?"

No professional player ever risked keeping this much money in their room. Robberies did often occur.

"You're as smart as you are sweet," Waco said.

Emily stuffed her new bankroll into her purse and together they rode the elevator to the lobby.

They reached the main floor, and as they stepped out of the elevator, Emily came to a sudden stop and took a step backward, colliding with Waco, who was following her.

Sitting in a lobby chair facing the elevator was Michael Mategna, looking grimly determined, even from a distance. A succession of turbulent thoughts flashed through Emily's mind at the sight of him. How had Michael gotten here? And what was he planning to say and do now that he was here?

Emily took a few quick steps toward the cashier's window with eyes wide and lips tight, hoping Michael would show restraint. But he had already started in her direction. He called out, loudly enough for his voice to carry across the distance that separated them and be heard all over the small lobby, attracting everyone's attention.

"Just one minute, Green Eyes. I believe you have something of mine. Perhaps we can work a trade." Emily noticed that he

carried a large brown paper bag tucked under one arm. As he stood before her, she could see a fierce light of fury in his eyes that almost made her forget her own reasons for being angry at him.

"How about it, lady? Want to trade my car for your clothes?" he proclaimed. With those words, he carefully turned the brown bag upside down and shook out everything she had left drying in front of his fire—sweater, slacks and underwear.

In the silence that filled the lobby, she heard someone smother a chuckle. Her cheeks burned. She stood straight and held her chin high, trying to respond with cold indifference to the embarrassing implications.

"I can't say much for the cleaning and pressing, but free delivery is such a nice touch," she snapped. She glared around the room, challenging anyone else to laugh, then bent down and gathered everything with as much dignity as she could.

Emily felt that her credibility around the hotel as a serious player was destroyed. It wasn't fair. She'd worked so hard to get a good reputation, but it was difficult in this world of men, and now, with one little slip, it was ruined. She should have known Michael was bad news for her, right from the beginning. She *had* known it. But she should have believed her head, instead of her heart. She never played poker with wild cards, and in the game of life, hearts were like wild cards—unpredictable and unreliable.

"I'll see you later, Waco," she said briefly. She was in a hurry to get to the elevator, and started back across the room.

"Now, wait." Waco said. "Don't forget what we came down here for. Put all that money in the safe." His voice carried clearly after her, but Emily just shook her head without turning. She could feel Michael's angry eyes following her



retreat.

She entered her room and threw everything on the floor, a piece at a time, as hard as she could. It helped to release the rage and humiliation she felt at having her private life aired in public.

A few minutes passed. There was a knock at the door and when she opened it there was Michael, looking majestically sullen and handsome.

"What do you want?" she demanded.

He leaned against the doorjamb and drawled, "My car keys, sweetness—that's what I was talking about downstairs, remember?"

Emily stood back and let him enter. "I'll probably never forget," she said as she handed him his keys.

He took them and pocketed them. "I also would like to apologize, Emily."

"Oh, yes, apologize in private for a public humiliation."

"Just listen to me for a minute, Emily. I want to know why you took off in my car. That was crazy! All I can think of is that I pushed you too far. Was that what made you run?"

He moved closer to her, standing right behind her. Emily felt his warmth and she stiffened, resisting the undeniable physical message his body communicated to her.

"You might as well know," she said, "that I overheard part of your conversation."

She watched his face, but up this close it seemed nearly expressionless. She thought fleetingly that he might make a good poker player after all.

"And?" was all he said.

"You acted as if you didn't know that man Sime, but you were talking about him on the telephone. And about me, too." She held his black-amber eyes with her sea-green ones. "Why, Michael?"

A shadow passed over Michael's face as he gazed deeply into her turbulent eyes.

"I don't like the implication that you're making, Emily. It sounds as if you don't have much regard for my integrity. I'm not used to people doubting my word. I've told you I'm an honest man and asked you to trust me."

"But Michael," she pleaded, "are you the proverbial lying blackfoot or the truthful whitefoot? How am I to know?"

He gave a quick bark of laughter. "Okay, okay. You leave me no choice. Emily, you told me you were suspicious of this man, Sime. I was concerned for you, and since I, um, have friends in law enforcement, I was able to have them run a check on him. That was one of my friends calling tonight, and your suspicions have been borne out in this case. Sime's done some time in jail for confidence scams, and there's reason to believe he has connections with organized crime. There — does that fit in with what you 'overheard'?"

"Yes," she responded slowly, feeling a tremendous relief wash over her at his sensible explanation. "It—it was very kind of you to look into it."

Michael's tender smile almost melted her heart. "I did it because I care about you, Emily. I want there to be nothing but truth between us. And this is the greatest truth I know." He took her in his arms, very gently holding her close to him.

As happiness flooded through her, she buried her flushed face in his shoulder.

"Oh, Michael, I'm so very sorry that I didn't trust you enough to stay and talk it over with you."

"I guess this means it wasn't my lovemaking you objected to?" he asked, a little hesitantly.

"Guess not," she murmured into his shoulder. "Why don't you take off your coat and stay awhile?"

"If I stay now, you know what's going to happen, don't you?" He studied her reaction to his words.

"I hope it means you'll make love to me," she said shyly.

"You're sure?"

"I'm very sure," she murmured.

He grinned, and as his lips curled upward, Emily studied them. Her own lips tingled and burned to touch his. She rose on tiptoe to press a kiss on the sensual lips she now felt were hers to possess.

Michael feverishly returned her kiss, parting her hot lips with his demanding tongue and fiercely conquering the sweetness of her mouth. Emily felt dizzy, overwhelmed, beyond reason, as she returned his kiss. Then she lay her cheek against his heart to listen to its thundering and felt a deep satisfaction. What she heard now was the truth.

Feverishly, they took turns undressing each other, while at the same time indulging in passionate caresses. Finally they walked in silence to her bed and lay down together.

Emily was beginning to feel as if she were all nerve endings, so completely involved in physical sensation was she. She shut her eyes as his hands and mouth moved slowly over her body, and concentrated on the sensations he was arousing.

Before long, she heard herself moan and cry out as she arched her body toward him. Then he seemed to forget caution, and he gave her as much of himself as she could ever ask, could ever want. Fierce, demanding, and entirely hers, he filled her empty spaces, and loneliness fled.

They moved together and she strained up toward him, eyes open now and a little surprised as she tumbled over the edge of the precipice without disaster, but fell endlessly, only to be caught by the wind and borne up again, gliding, circling, swooping, until the laughter and tears welled up inside and shook her frame.

Michael's journey, too, ceased finally, and he collapsed next to her, spent, slick with perspiration, but still holding her

close, his tender lips resting at her breast.

"I love you, Emily," he said finally.

Hearing those important words on his lips rattled her strangely. She felt he meant it, but the little nagging doubt lingered that there were things he wasn't telling her, and until he did—she wasn't able to say the words she wanted so much to be true, and felt a pang of guilt at the puzzled look in his eyes when she didn't respond in kind to his declaration.

"Michael," she said throatily. His name was the only love-word that came to mind, and it seemed to encompass all her feelings quite adequately.

He began kissing her again, and she responded by caressing his sinewy body. This time their love was sweet, the climax as slow and graceful and inevitable as the lark's song at dawn.

The morning sun streamed in on their faces. Emily felt its warmth creep over her as she came slowly into wakefulness. Carefully she rolled over, not wanting to wake him but wanting to see him.

His eyes flicked open. "Good morning, sweetheart." He smiled lazily as he spoke. "Do I smell coffee?"

"Only if a room service waiter just wheeled some past our door. Shall I order something for us?" At his nod, she reached for the telephone and dialed as Michael rolled over and wrapped his arms around her, burying his face against her back.

Emily ordered coffee, toast, juice, and eggs for two, to be delivered in an hour. "I wanted to give us time to get cleaned up. It's only nine forty-five," she explained.

"Blast!" He released her and jumped out of bed, grabbing for his scattered clothes. "I'm supposed to meet someone at ten this morning."

"But I just ordered breakfast."

Michael scrambled into his clothes and ran his fingers through his thick hair.

"I'm sorry about that, darling. I'll be back. We'll have a nice dinner tonight and talk. Gotta go!"

He kissed her absently on the forehead and, checking for his car keys, dashed out the door.

Emily tossed a pillow at his disappearing figure and fell back on the bed. "Seduced and abandoned," she moaned in mock despair, feeling no doubt that Michael would be back as promised.

With tentative delicacy, she sorted through her feelings in the aftermath of their lovemaking. Was the warm glow one of physical attraction only? Had they merely succumbed to the extreme physical magnetism between them, or did she dare hope there was more to it? She'd seen things that weren't there with Jack, imagined a love in him that he apparently hadn't felt, in spite of his words. But surely she wasn't wrong about Michael, she pleaded with herself.

"I love you, Michael," she whispered, enjoying the sound of it. He was so many things—kind, smart, affectionate, fun. He cared about her. And he was trustworthy. She smiled in perfect contentment and drifted into a daydream of the future.

Half an hour later, she got up, and she was just finishing getting dressed when there was a knock at the door. Checking her watch, she saw that room service was early. Or maybe it was Michael coming back, she thought delightedly.

But suddenly, as she undid the safety lock with one hand and turned the doorknob with the other, she was slammed against the wall and thrown off-balance. Two men crowded in, pushing her out of the way, and closed the door behind them.

The faces of both men were concealed by gaudy knitted ski masks of red, blue, and yellow, which covered their heads. The bigger of the two men pinned Emily against the wall. She felt dizzy and faint.

"What do you want?" she gasped.

"Shut up," the smaller man said in a voice that seemed familiar.

"Where's your money?" barked the big man, in a voice Emily recognized immediately. After an initial jolt of shock, she nearly laughed out loud.

Certain now that the two men were Sime and Hutchins, she felt more confidence. Fear of the unknown dissipated, and the two men in masks seemed a little silly. But it would be better, she knew, if they continued to think she had not recognized them.

The big man said, "Tell us where the money is. This place is such a mess we'll never find it."

Emily gestured at the pile of clothing on the floor, where she had last seen the bankroll. "It's in there someplace."

Sime pounced on the jumbled heap, tossing everything about. First he found the purse, then finally the money.

"I got it, I got it!" he yipped with glee.

Hutchins grabbed the roll away from Sime. Then he dragged Emily and shoved her sideways into the bathroom, so that she landed on the floor, her back struck the bathtub hard. The door slammed and she heard Hutchins yell: "Let's go!"

"Is that chair going to hold the door okay?" Sime asked.

"Sure," Hutchins growled. This was followed by the slam of the door into the hallway as the two men apparently left. All was silent except for the drip of a faucet.

Emily rubbed her temples. Those sleazy little rats. She rose to examine the door handle and sighed in relief. The smooth metal doughnut plate around the knob was held to the door with a small screw, making it suitable for her to escape.

Pawing through her manicure kit, Emily soon found her favorite tweezers. Using the tiny flat end as a screwdriver, she soon

had the door open.

Without halting to think, Emily charged out of her hotel room and headed for the elevator to the lobby. If those two hadn't already checked out, she could call the police from the front desk. The fact that they didn't know she'd identified them was a saving grace—they might take their time in getting away. She must stop them!

At the desk, she was told that the two men had left for Thrifty Scott's Garage, where they planned to rent a car. The clerk gave her the garage's address and Emily was already running out the door before he finished speaking. There was no time for calling the police.

With furrowed brow, she walked briskly toward Thrifty Scott's Rent-a-Car which was only two blocks away.

As she neared the garage, she peered anxiously toward the glass-enclosed rental office and, sure enough, there were her two villains standing at a counter. But to her shock they were not alone.

"Michael?" she whispered to herself.

There could be no mistake. He was talking to the men who had just robbed her as if they were old friends.

Trustworthy, honest, and true. Michael. She had done it again. Been fooled. Suddenly, nothing mattered. The money and the robbery seemed supremely unimportant.

Only moments before, everything had mattered because she was in love. Now nothing mattered because she was in love with someone who didn't love her in return.

Emily turned away from the scene abruptly, hoping she had not been observed, and began to walk back to the hotel.

It was all wrong from the beginning, even if she hadn't overheard that telephone call. Years of being smart and independent and self-reliant, and then she lapsed into insanity. She wanted to be

fooled because she had been attracted to Michael Mategna from the very first moment.

With a conscious effort of will, she wiped all expression from her face, blanked out the hurting—almost. Enough, at least. It was time to get back to business.

As soon as she filed a report with the police, she'd call Waco and hitch a ride with him to Las Vegas. The tournament was due to start in a couple of days, and she was going to need to be in top form if she were to make up for the loss of last night's winnings and pay off her father's debts at last. And maybe after that—maybe she would go looking for a different kind of life, one without any Michaels in it.

She checked out of her room that very evening, eager to avoid Michael, and talked Waco into driving to Las Vegas that night.

The tournament came and went and although she won a good deal of money, she still felt empty inside.

The day after the tournament ended, Emily went down to the hotel's swimming pool, seeking some relaxation in the sun.

The sounds of splashing from the giant swimming pool, the voices of people at play, started to lull her into a dreamy state. She adjusted her position and reached for the sunglasses on the small, wrought-iron table next to her chair.

"Allow me," said a familiar deep-velvet voice behind her. She stiffened, her heart jumped about a foot to lodge in her throat, and the hairs on the back of her neck prickled as a lean, tanned hand reached out and put the dark glasses into her nerveless fingers.

Trying to disregard the almost physical pain at seeing Michael again, she smiled casually.

"Well! What have you been doing with

yourself for the last week?"

"I had some business to take care of in Tahoe," he said, "before I could come after you."

Emily pursed her lips. "Why *did* you come after me, Michael?" she said, her voice low and all pretense of casualness gone for the moment.

His eyes narrowed and she saw a muscle in his jaw move. "You and I have a long-overdue date."

What a nerve the man had, coming up to her as if nothing had happened. "I don't think so," she responded. "You were stood up."

He looked surprised and a little taken aback, but his next words were still full of infuriating self-confidence.

"Being stood up doesn't really offend me, Emily. The chase stimulates me. Look, I know you've been forced to practice a lot of self-control in your profession. But you also need to learn when to let go. Don't be so afraid of your loving nature that you throw away what we have."

His words spun a silken spell, like a spider's web, in her mind, and she burst out desperately, "What more do you want? Aren't you done with me yet?"

She realized from Michael's words that he was assuming she had run away from her own emotions.

Deliberately, Michael took her hand in his and stroked his thumb over her racing pulse as she tried to pull it away.

"No," he said. "I'm not done with you yet. And you aren't through with me, either. You see? Even this slight contact has quickened your pulse."

Emily snatched her hand away from him. "Leave me alone, Michael," she said stiffly, as his words and touch reminded her all too well of the night they'd spent locked in each other's arms. "We have nothing more to talk about."

"That's not true. For one thing, I thought you'd be interested to hear that a couple of your old friends are in jail." He seemed almost pleased by the idea of the men in jail. She must be misreading him.

"Friends of mine?"

"Richard Sime and Ed Hutchins."

Emily had not mentioned Michael's name to the police. Perhaps, she thought, he's trying to find out why I didn't turn him in, or he's smug about not getting caught. That would account for his good cheer.

Her voice dripped with sarcasm as she tried to ignore his gaze. "I really believe you know them better than I do."

"I probably do, at that. It's too bad you ever crossed paths with them. I don't like to see you exposed to criminal elements."

"For someone in your line of work," she said caustically, "that's pretty hypocritical."

He started a bit, and his jaw tightened. "My familiarity with that element only makes me want to protect you all the more. I just don't understand why you didn't come to me when they held you up!"

"Why on earth would I have come to you about it?"

He frowned. "I thought we had developed some trust between us with our—close relationship. You've never seemed to me to be the type of woman who'd go to bed with a man she didn't have some regard for."

Emily's face flamed and she looked away. "Go away, Michael. Leave me alone."

"Why?" he taunted. "Afraid of your own feelings?"

"The only thing I'm afraid of is being seen in public with you. It might damage my reputation for honesty. People are likely to think I've fallen in with bad company if they see me with you."

Michael took her insults as lightly as a man brushed away mosquitoes, making her feel weaponless and ineffectual. "Anyone who thinks you're honest, Emily, doesn't know you very well. You lie to yourself about your own feelings all the time. For instance, I know you were glad to see me today, but you tried to pretend otherwise. I know you love me, but you won't admit it."

"I'm not a masochist, Michael. I've been hurt enough."

"Not by me, Emily. We parted on good terms in Tahoe, didn't we?"

Emily decided to restrain herself from pointed accusations, in the hope of avoiding denials and the added lies and pain. "Let me put it this way. You've become too associated in my mind with being robbed while I was in Tahoe. I would prefer to avoid everything that happened up there, to forget it. That's why I left without a good-bye."

Michael's lips curved upward in a cynical smile. "Just had to get back to the poker table, huh? Don't bother making excuses for doing what you want to do, Emily. It's all you can handle, isn't it? You can pretend to be so detached and superior when you're playing cards. But I'll bet you can't play poker with me for a whole evening and come out a winner. Because I know the real you, and you can't con me."

"I, con you? That's rich," she said with a lofty air. She couldn't help showing more of her hand than she wanted. "That's what you've wanted all along from me, isn't it, Michael? A chance to win my money when you think you have an unfair advantage. You may be able to upset me here by the pool, but when there's money on the table you'll just be another outclassed amateur, so I advise you not to challenge me."

"It's never been money I wanted from you, dammit, but if that's all you relate

to, and if I have to play poker to get what I want from you, I will. I want you to prove to me that I have no effect on you."

"If you want to play cards with me, you'll need a stake. And I don't mean checks. I mean cash and real property."

Michael smiled. "As a matter of fact, I have quite a bit of cash available to me, if you're serious about meeting my challenge."

"I never kid about poker," she responded icily.

"Okay. When and where shall we do this?"

"Tonight. About seven or eight?"

Michael looked at his wristwatch. "Make that about nine. I have some phone calls to make."

"Nine, then. And we'll play for three hours or until one of us runs out of money."

"Shouldn't we start out with the same amount of money in that case? To be fair?"

"Probably," she agreed. "Any suggestions?"

He hardly hesitated at all. "It seems to me that twenty thousand would be about right to prove my point."

Emily could barely restrain a smile. "Exactly the amount I had in mind. And I'll get Waco to let us use his suite."

"If you have your friend dealing the cards, I want to bring a witness who's on my side," Michael demanded.

Emily cast him a disdainful glance. "Waco is a man of the utmost integrity, if you're worried about him cheating for me. Just keep your witness out of my line of sight and away from my back."

"I guarantee she'll be quiet as a mouse."

The revelation that he was bringing a woman to their poker game surprised Emily, but as she considered the idea, she felt it was typical of Michael. It would be interesting, she told herself coldly, to see

what this other woman looked like.

"Okay, then," she said coldly.

"Great!" he said "Oh, and Emily. Wear those emerald earrings of yours. You're going to need them."

That evening, nervous and tense, Emily dressed carefully, and put her hair up, the better to show off her lucky earrings.

She wondered bitterly how Michael would try to cheat her. She was sure he would have to cheat in order to win, and he planned on winning, that was clear. But with Waco there, she felt she'd be well protected, no matter what.

Michael might not even try to cheat. He was more the overconfident type. And he was bright, she had to give him that.

Why, oh, why, did she feel so drawn to that man, she asked herself, in spite of all she knew or guessed about him?

It was five before nine when she rapped lightly on Waco's door. Much to her surprise, it was Michael who opened to her knock. At the mere sight of him, emotions she thought were under control came flooding back over her, all the anger and all the same devastating attraction.

Michael's eyes softened for a moment. "You look exquisite, Emily. Come in," he said, and stood back so she could discern Waco standing near the window and chatting animatedly with an attractive young woman.

Waco looked over and said, "There's my girl now. On time as always. Come over here, Em, and meet this nice lady."

Michael followed her over and did the honors.

"This is my business associate, Linda Reynolds. She's done me a big favor by coming here tonight. Well, shall we get started?"

They took their places around the table. With a flourish, Michael opened an envelope and turned it upside down. Twenty thousand dollars in hundreds and

small bills dropped out on the table.

"How dramatic!" Emily couldn't refrain from commenting, as she took out her own neatly wrapped bankroll.

The game began with Waco and Linda watching like hawks over them. Emily couldn't help feeling curious as to who Linda was, but soon the intensity of the game crowded out all other mental activity.

She began by winning every hand, and she smiled inwardly with satisfaction as she saw the chips pile up in front of her.

At ten-thirty, they broke for soft drinks and some canapes. Linda went out on the balcony alone to smoke a cigarette, and Waco disappeared in the direction of the bathroom. Emily was alone with Michael, the last thing in the world she wanted.

He approached her casually. "How am I doing, champ?"

"As far as I'm concerned," she said abruptly, "you're doing fine. You're losing."

"Oh, come on," he said, coming a little too close for comfort. "I'm a little behind, but it's nothing I couldn't make up on a single hand."

He was standing so close now that she felt his tension all over, like a sound low enough to be felt rather than heard—but there was no sound. Involuntarily, Emily looked at his mouth and thought she heard him say, "I love you."

She turned away from him and walked over to Waco, who whispered into her ear, "I don't think either one of them is cheating, hon. I can't spot a thing."

Emily sighed. "I can't either, Waco, and I just can't figure out why he's so confident. He's a lot of things, but he's not a fool."

"I can see that. You know, under different circumstances, I think I'd like him."

"How can you say that!"

"Much as you deny it, honeybee, you



like him yourself."

Emily was about to deny Waco's statement when Linda came in and resumed her seat and Michael took his.

Emily and Waco returned to the table.

The play flowed smoothly back and forth for several more hands, and although each experienced their share of good and bad, Emily's pile of chips slowly began to decrease.

She became increasingly tense as Michael ceased to pay attention to the cards and kept staring at her in a brooding manner.

At one point, Emily felt her patience with him strain to the breaking point, and she cried, "Stop it, Michael, just stop it! I know what you're trying to do!"

Their gazes locked for a second and she grew dizzy and disoriented, forgetting everything.

Waco's voice broke the charged silence. "Emily? How many cards do you want?"

Startled, she roused herself from Michael's spell by looking down at her five cards. "Two," she said. She was behind and it was nearly eleven-thirty. She wanted to beat Michael decisively and win as much of the money back from him as she could.

After each card that Waco dealt, Emily kept raising the stakes, almost carelessly, determined to convince Michael that she had the winning hand.

But when their last hands were turned over, her worst fears became true. Michael had a straight flush.

Unable to fully realize what had just happened to her, Emily waited for the hollow feeling to go away and the roaring in her ears to stop as she agitatedly drummed her fingers on the table. She had only three chips left. Three hundred dollars out of twenty thousand.

Not only had she lost to Michael, but she had also lost the amount of money

necessary to pay the last installment of her loan. She was determined not to let Michael see her desperation, but he seemed to sense it.

"I'm willing to bet forty thousand dollars on one hand of cards, Em, if you're game," he challenged with a half-smile that intrigued her.

"I have nothing to match it, Michael. No assets of any kind."

"There's only one bet I'm interested in making. If you lose, you marry me tonight. If I lose, you get all forty thousand."

"That's ridiculous." Emily frowned, wondering what he really wanted.

"Think of it," he said temptingly. "You can win it all back. I know how good you are. The question is, do you have the guts to gamble when it really means something to you personally? Come on, Emily. Take a chance!"

His cockiness angered her. "Don't push me, Michael, or you'll regret it!" she snapped. "Waco, You and Linda are witnesses to the wager. Michael is betting forty thousand dollars against marriage to me that I can't win the next hand of poker. And," she took a deep breath, "I'm meeting his bet!"

Waco complained. "I don't like this one little bit. No good comes of crazy bets."

She reached over and squeezed his hand. "It's all right, Waco. I'm going to win."

But she didn't. Moment later, Michael's black eyes looked calmly at her across the table, and she began to tremble as he laid down his cards. The ace of diamonds, the knave of hearts, and three fives. Michael had won.

She stared in consternation at the cards, as if they had somehow betrayed her, while Michael rose, came to her side of the table, and went down on one knee by her side. He took her hand in his, smiling.

ed, and said ironically, "Darling! You're mine." But the acquisitive gleam in his eye told Emily he wasn't joking at all.

"Michael, get up! Don't be so foolish," she snapped. "The joke is over."

"It's no joke," he replied, rising to his feet. "You and I will be married before the sun rises."

Emily laughed nervously. But when no one else joined in the laughter, she looked around. "You're not really serious, are you? About my marrying you, I mean. What kind of game is this?"

"No game, Emily. You think I'm a con man?"

Anger stiffened Emily's spine. He was still trying to deceive her! "Oh, come on! I know what you are. I'm just trying to figure out what's behind all this."

Michael frowned. "You say that you know about me. Let's clarify—just what is it you think you know?"

"I saw you with Sime and Hutchins at the car-rental agency right after they'd robbed me. You said you didn't know them, and there you were ready to divide up my money. I never reported you to the police because I had no proof of my suspicions, but I don't think someone standing on your shaky moral ground should hold me to the promise of marriage. Now, I'll agree that I owe you forty thousand dollars, and I will pay you that sum within the year, but that's all."

"I begin to understand what's been going wrong between us, Emily," Michael said. "Your overly suspicious imagination has added up a few innocent numbers and gotten the formula for the atomic bomb. Even so, I thought you were the sort of person who lived up to her word."

He took a deep breath after looking over at Linda who was, like Waco, stirring uncomfortably in her chair. "Look, darling. I want all your services for the next year at the very least. After that, it

will be up to you if I haven't convinced you I'm worthy of your love. During that time, I expect you to stay away from the poker table completely, because I hope you'll be able to develop more normal, trusting instincts when you don't have to doubt everyone's motives."

Emily tried to ignore his stinging comment on her character. "If there's anything I can't do," she replied in a low voice, "it's avoid poker for the next year. I need the money now more than ever, thanks to you."

Michael stalked back to his seat and shoved the cash he had collected in her direction across the table. "Then take this, dammit, if money is what you want. It's yours anyway. If you want more, I'll write you a check."

"What do you mean, it's mine?" she asked, unable to keep the suspicion out of her voice.

"I took it when we were arresting Sime and Hutchins. Linda, would you show Emily your badge and identification card, please?"

The woman complied, Michael took similar items from his inner jacket pocket and threw them down on the table as well.

"Is this supposed to mean that you're both with the FBI?" Emily said weakly.

"Yes. You just happened into a hornet's nest, Emily. Sime and Hutchins have long been suspected of money laundering. I followed them up here and recorded their movements. We were building a chain, trying to get to the top men."

"Why couldn't you have told me who you were and what you were doing in Tahoe, Michael?"

"It would have been a breach of security if he'd talked about a current case under investigation. I'm not even allowed to talk about things like that to my husband," Linda said.

Michael looked at Waco and Linda.

"Would you two please excuse us for a moment?"

Linda put her identification back in her purse and stood up, ready to leave at once. After a look in Emily's direction to ascertain that she was all right, Waco said, "I'll take Linda downstairs to the cocktail lounge. We'll be there for about half an hour."

"Do you believe now that I'm an honest man?" he asked, moving close when they were alone. But before she could stammer her answer, he'd pulled her up into his arms.

"I don't want to spend another night, another moment, without you," he whispered, his breath a hot intrusion in her ear. "I want you in my bed and in my home, and I want you to wear my name. I'm a greedy man, Emily." He kissed her, his mouth as voracious as his words. "And you're no welsher. You made a bet and lost. If you go back on your word, I'll spread it all over Las Vegas. I'll take out billboards in the Bahams and hire a skywriter in Monte Carlo."

She had to laugh at the whimsy, but she half believed him. Her emotions were on a roller-coaster ride. Emily knew they wanted each other terribly, and she had, after all, made the deal in good faith, if thoughtlessly. She told herself that she must do the honorable thing and keep her promise.

She made one last protest, though. "Just remember that I think this is the wrong way to start a marriage. But," she said with a swallow, "I don't want to welsh. How can I renege on my own promise?"

"You can't," agreed Michael. He released her. "Shall we go tie the knot?"

Emily picked up the bundle of money which represented the last of her financial obligations. "I just have to put this in the safe, and then I'm ready," she told him

with a smile.

The wedding chapel Michael chose was as quaint and traditional as a tiny country church. Linda served as an attendant, and Waco gave the bride away.

The ceremony was over quickly, and it was just as well. If Emily had time to think, she would have been too frightened of the tremendous commitment to say "I do."

After the ceremony, Waco bid them goodbye and wanted to know where he'd be able to reach her, if necessary.

As Michael wrote out his address in San Francisco, Emily felt a touch of unreality. Was she really going to live in San Francisco, a city she had never visited before, with a man she barely knew? Later, she would think about it later, she told herself, to stem the feel of rising panic.

As Michael gave the cab driver the name of his hotel, Emily lodged a small protest. "Shouldn't we go to my hotel first and get my things?"

"We'll go get them in the morning," he said, with a meaningful look. "I don't intend to spend my wedding night watching you pack suitcases."

By the time they got to his room, Emily was a nervous wreck. She headed for the shower, undressed, bathed, and put on a pajama top she borrowed from Michael. When she was done, she came out and sat on the bed, waiting for Michael, who was in turn using the bathroom.

"Get ahold of yourself, Emily," she scolded. It wasn't as if she hadn't been intimate with Michael before, or that his physical presence wasn't exciting at this very moment, but she felt self-conscious now that they were legally man and wife, knowing exactly what was expected. It was her wedding night. She should be blissfully happy, and instead she felt self-conscious, trapped, and terribly tired.

When Michael came back into the

room, he lowered himself to sit beside her, and placed an arm around her shoulders to give her a reassuring hug and squeeze.

"Don't be nervous, darling. I'm willing to wait until you're comfortable with the idea of marriage. I'm willing just to be near you, to sleep next to you. I realize I forced you to marry me, and I won't make you do anything else."

She felt a little lump of ice inside her melting at his gentle words, and she turned a look of gratitude on him, only to be taken aback by the fire in his eyes.

"Nothing you don't want," he repeated in a low voice. "But how about a little good-night kiss?"

"You won't go any further?"

"I promise." He lowered his mouth to kiss her, a kiss that lived up to the promise in his eyes.

Her arms rose to clasp his neck and she kissed him back, her own tongue seductively tasting his. Deliciously hot sensations shimmered through her, and yet her wary mind maintained a certain reserve.

His kisses continued, now gentle, now wild. The more he played with her, the more Emily became aroused, until she was only conscious of his mouth and body, and of the burning need that seemed to permeate every fiber of her being. Slowly, she surrendered her fortress of doubt and mistrust, giving in to the need he created in her to be completely his, to give him everything, as he asked. She melted, relaxed against him, accepting him totally, with eyes closed and lips parted.

He recognized her yielding as he drew back for a moment to undress her, then himself. His next kiss was even more sensual than before. She'd never expected that surrendering could be such bliss.

"I love you," she said.

"I always suspected as much," he said huskily, and with a certain satisfaction.

Emily felt a power and a joy now and

realized that by surrendering to him, she had gained strength. With commitment and trust, they gained not just physical pleasure, but also love expressed physically.

At last, when neither of them could wait any longer, Michael took her in the ultimate embrace, and she held him to her heart in rapture.

They clung together, floating gently down from their own little bit of heaven for several moments. Then, exhausted, they slept peacefully, holding each other tight.

It was nearly noon when Emily again became aware of the world after the night's enchantments. After noticing with delight how comfortably peaceful she felt lying in Michael's arms, she decided to get up and call room service and order breakfast for two.

Michael heard her on the phone. He stirred and yawned widely. "Breakfast, mm, yes. Good little wife," he muttered, reaching out to pat her hip.

His innocent words sent her into a tailspin.

Good little wife? She didn't know how to be a wife! What on earth was she going to do?

"I'm going to take a shower," she said abruptly.

She hurried into the bathroom and locked the door before jumping into the shower, because she knew his tendencies and wanted to be alone to think without his warm body distracting her.

What, she wondered as she stood there, letting the water beat down on her, was she going to do when Michael's family and friends found out about her career as a poker player and her less-than-illustrious childhood? How would his friends and superiors feel about her past? At the very least they would suspect her of questionable connections.

She felt scared but she had promised Michael at least a year's trial, and she would stick it out, she reminded herself. He would be able to judge the consequences of this rash marriage for himself.

She came out of the shower and into Michael's awaiting arms. "Not now," she whispered. "Get your shower first, and then let's eat and talk!"

He acquiesced with a grunt and disappeared into the bathroom.

As a sign of her commitment to this new life that was about to break around her head like a storm, Emily decided impulsively to retrieve all her clothes and bring them back to the room she now shared with Michael, as a surprise. She envisioned Michael's happiness when he saw her voluntarily hanging her things next to his in the closet.

As soon as she was dressed, she rushed out of the room, down the street and across the driveway to her own hotel. She packed hurriedly, and in a matter of minutes, was standing at the curb wondering how to get her four cases to Michael's room.

Suddenly, her arm was caught in a hard, hurting grasp and she found herself jerked around to face a barely controlled Michael.

"I knew you'd come for your clothes," he said in an accusatory tone.

Emily tried to pull away. "Michael, you're hurting me," she protested. "I just came over to collect my stuff."

Her sincerity and quiet manner must have pierced through Michael's temper, for he loosened his grip on her arm, despite the fact that his face still gave evidence of a tempest inside.

He went into the hotel and got a bellman, and they watched him load the cases onto his cart and push them across the street to Michael's hotel. Once back in his room, they found their breakfast waiting for them on the table by the bed.

Michael took a sip of orange juice and then cleared his throat. "I guess it's obvious I thought you were running out again."

Trying to be gentle, Emily said, "I should have left a note. I'm not used to accounting for my actions to anyone. It never occurred to me you'd think I had run away from you after last night. But you did jump to conclusions."

"Based on previous experience, you must admit." Then he grinned engagingly. "I hate myself." A shadow passed over his face then. "I've been thinking. Even though you weren't running away, maybe you'd like to. If the only thing holding you to me is this wedding certificate and your sense of honor, I don't want you. That's hard for me to say, and I can't promise I won't follow you, but I want you to know you're free. I release you from your vows."

Suddenly, everything seemed much easier. The option of choice was a precious gift. "Thank you, Michael," she said simply. "But now I'm really confused. I was serious when I made those vows last night. Yet on the other hand, I am full of doubts about the future. You see, my experiences so far have done nothing to make me trust men or marriage. My father was a charmer, but he gambled excessively, and ruined my mother's life. When he died, he left me with huge debts, which is why I started playing poker. It was the only way I knew how to raise that kind of money. And just when I had nearly raised the amount I needed, with Waco's help, I fell in love with another charmer called Jack. He borrowed my money, lost it all in a game, and disappeared without a word of apology. You see how I came to believe I had bad judgment in men? I've never needed to be burned more than once to learn when something was too hot for me to handle." She shrugged ruefully.

"I may be too hot to handle, darling, but I'm committed to you—to us. We *are* married, after all."

"So was Daddy," she reminded him. "Marriage isn't a magic ticket to happiness. I'll try to be a good wife, Michael, for the year we've agreed on, at least, but I don't know how to do anything wifely. My chief talent is calling room service or the valet."

"You're smart, darling, and smart women can learn whatever they choose to. But I've got plenty of money, and if you want to do something besides keep house and cook, we'll keep my cleaning service and eat out every night. And you can even go back and get a college degree if you want!"

Emily's eyes gleamed with speculation. "I could be an accountant, like I always wanted. Maybe be a CPA in a few years."

Michael laughed. "And then you could support us both."

"I might enjoy that. But what about your family? I'm a little afraid of them."

"As long as you please me, they'll like you. But we have to face it, Emily. You'll never have their full approval until we produce a few kids."

"Kids? Michael, isn't it a little soon to be thinking of a family? Children are a commitment to the future. A woman has to believe that she has a future with the children's father—a long future—so that the kids will have two people bringing them up."

"I intend to spend a long time with you, Emily," he said.

She was nearly convinced, but there was still a question in her mind that need-

ed to be answered. "What about your job? Isn't it dangerous when you arrest people? I'll worry all the time. What if we did have children and you were killed? That would be so horrible for them."

"Emily," he said sternly, "you're borrowing trouble. I'm in the office most of the time. This last case was an exception because of my place in Tahoe. Sooner or later, I'm going to get out of law enforcement and run for public office, so don't worry about becoming a widow with orphans."

"Public office!" she exclaimed. "With me as a wife? That wouldn't be very good for your image."

"Nonsense," he replied, with growing impatience. "The public likes to elect men who have gutsy wives with careers of their own." His face grew stern. "You're not going to dump me on the pretext of it being for my own good, Emily. And I'm going to live to bounce our grandchildren on my knee."

"Well, maybe our children won't want to have children," she cautioned.

"When they see how happy their mom and dad are, they'll have dozens."

"I hope so, Michael," she said with a little sigh.

"Trust me. I only want to love you, Emily." He came over and hugged her in a tight embrace.

She wrapped her arms around his broad shoulders and rubbed her body brazenly against him.

"My husband," she said, feeling the wonder of it all.

"Trust me?" he said, after a long passionate kiss.

"Completely," she said, knowing that she did. ♥





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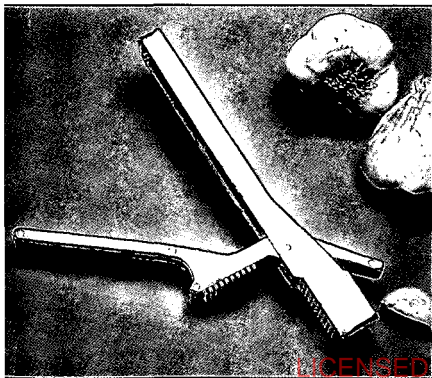
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